

The Leviathan of the Covenant

明血約の リヴァイアサン

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盟血約の

リヴァース

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「もっと私を
見てくれなくちゃイヤ」

「なあにやってんですか、
ふたりとも〜！」



「ハンニバル出現後の
割引セール……ニューヨークの
風物詩みたいなものだけど」

「さつきはありがとう！
君のおかげで助かったよ！」

クリス
Chris

マリー
Marie



ルサルカ、今です。
必滅之法『射陽の神弓』！

地上付近まで降下してきたルサルカ。
マンハッタン橋へと直進を続ける
ハンニバル軍の側面にまわりこみ、
『弓の秘文字』最強の秘術を解き放つ。
紅蓮の弓より黄金に輝く
光の矢が撃ち出された。

Prologue

In the past, New York was the largest international city in the world.

At its heart was Manhattan Island, which was now a land ruled by dragonkind. Humans called it the Old Manhattan Concession.

However, despite its name as a concession territory, very few dragons made their residence there.

The vast majority of its area was either wasteland or wilderness inhabited by neither dragons nor humans. Standing here, the Monolith, a gigantic square prism towering over a kilometer tall, was the only proof that this was dragon territory.

However, this Old Manhattan had one ruler.

Red Hannibal.

The dragon king of dragon kings, considered the representative of dragonkind. Not only was he the first *sapient dragon* encountered in the history of mankind, but he was also the spokesman who had forced humanity to sign an unequal treaty in humiliation.

Such a character was currently gliding leisurely in the sky over the New York wasteland.

His body length was twenty meters with an even larger wingspan.

All the scales over his entire body were bright red, with an armor-like exoskeleton over his chest area, awe-inspiring like a great marshal commanding a million troops.

Unbeknownst to mankind, he was referred to as the Red Flame Emperor among his kind.

However, he preferred the name given to him by humans and always styled himself as Hannibal.

That being said—

'O Flame Emperor, may I have a moment of your time?'

A *thought wave* transmitted from the ground was addressing him with that ancient title.

A certain old acquaintance was using Mental Communication magic. Although he had no obligation to humor the request, it would be a hassle to be continually pestered, hence, the leisurely gliding Hannibal could not help but shrug like a human.

A dragon king who was not a pure-blooded dragon—Hannibal.

Using a dragon's body, he unintentionally performed an action that was supposed to be done when in human form.

In any case, he was currently descending slowly. The flourishing forest stretching under his view was a place known as Central Park in the past. However, his landing spot was not inside the park.

The main road on the east of Central Park. This was known as Fifth Avenue back in the previous century, a major thoroughfare where humans gathered from all over the world.

...In fact, on a whim once, Hannibal had browsed this city's map.

Thanks to that, he still had more or less some impression of the names of several New York-era locations.

While landing, he altered his appearance, transforming from a dragon to a human.

The massive dragon, twenty meters long, turned into a muscular 195cm-tall man within the blink of an eye—He believed that it would be easier to converse this way.

"What a rare occasion. It has been ten years since the last time you showed up, hasn't it?"

The dragon king gazed at the human male standing on the asphalt road.

Dressed in a black suit, bearing a well-proportioned face that showed

experienced astringency, he was the man tasked with the job of being the guide for the Road to Kingship.

"Based on your way of doing things, Sophocles, this is quite a show of sincerity."

"You are too kind, Lord. I am a man who would visit every day for an audience with you so long as there is such a necessity."

The corners of Sophocles' lips parted to produce a crack in the shape of a smile.

He was not completely expressionless. Rather, due to not showing his emotions for too long—over a thousand years—his ability to express himself had naturally atrophied.

"The purpose of my visit today is to provide counsel."

"Counsel huh?"

"Precisely. Lord, twenty years have elapsed since you made this city your new territory. As a magic city and enchanted realm, this place has developed to maturity without impediment. And now, this land has probably reached its peak, a turning point."

"This city" referred to the Old Manhattan Concession.

Even the biggest metropolis in the history of mankind had turned into a wasteland now.

A city of emptiness where there was not even a single human or dragon apart from Hannibal. However, the number of residents living here were *actually* quite numerous. Such a group could be considered the red dragon king's serfs.

Sophocles continued further.

"Shouldn't you to leave this city to establish another concession as a stronghold? Or rather, it is time to demand that the humans offer up additional land."

"Hmm."

"O king, I implore you to consider—"

"Sorry, but forget it."

The man, who served as an adviser of sorts to dragon kings and Tyrannoi, offered his suggestion.

However, Hannibal interrupted him and grinned. The red dragon king's human form was that of a well-built man in his prime. However, his face was showing an unbelievably gentle expression.

In complete contrast to the man before him, Hannibal was a man who expressed a full range of emotions with honesty.

While a smile like a mischievous child's, he said to Sophocles, "You should probably offer your advice to someone else. The Black Lightning Emperor would probably concur happily no matter how much you speak. There are other things I wish to do at the present."

"...I see. It appears that you already have a plan in mind."

Sophocles' lips once again formed a crack that could hardly be called a smile.

It was probably a wry smile. His counsel, founded upon extraordinary knowledge and insight, had been rejected summarily by the dragon kings—This was actually quite commonplace.

"Oh actually, I've recently discovered something more interesting than fighting for territory."

"Interesting?"

"Yes. Let me see, how do the humans say it...? Right, like that."

Hannibal smiled like a child again.

Then in an astoundingly rich baritone voice, he said to his non-dragon companion, "Have you heard of it? It's something called democracy."

Chapter 1 - Inheritance Game

Part 1

It was the latter part of July with summer holidays having just started.

Haruga Haruomi and several witches had visited Izu together on an impromptu expedition.

However, travels in July did not end there. A few days after returning to Tokyo New Town, the team was off on another journey. Not only that, the destination this time was not even within the country— "...I've been seeing the sea a lot lately."

With a clear blue sky overhead, visibility seemed to stretch far above as though one could see all the way into space.

Naturally, they were surrounded by sea in all directions, because Hal and company were traveling on a JMSDF escort vessel, observing a *military exercise* from the deck.

Although Japan's climate was quite hot, this place was on a different level.

The sunlight shining from above was so bright that it was almost like violence. The temperature on the deck also kept rising. Hal's hair was hot from the sun. Parts of skin not covered by his t-shirt also felt scorched like being burned by fire.

After all, these territorial waters of the Solomon Islands were near the equator in the southern hemisphere.

"By the way, Luna, to what kind of TPO (time, place, occasion) do you owe your current attire?"

"What a way to put things, Harry. Kettle, please meet pot."

Faced with Hal, who was wearing a t-shirt, half pants and sandals, Luna replied with an unimpressed expression. As for the blonde witch herself, she was wearing a new swimsuit that she had bought prior to setting off from Japan.

"Don't worry. I am pairing it properly with military style."

On the previous expedition, Luna Francois had dressed in black as her usual motif.

But this time, her choice was camo print paired with a khaki pareo around her waist. That said, this was an escort vessel's deck yet unbelievably, she even had a flower wreath on her head.

Staring at Luna Francois' gorgeous appearance, Hal could not help but retort, "But I think you have to pick navy style instead of army style in this situation. Like a sailor uniform or something."

"Despite saying that, Harry, you're showing quite a burning gaze."

"....."

This could not be helped.

After all, she was bending forward while dressed in a bikini, approaching him as though to display her chest to him, emphasizing her upper body in a seductive cougar pose...

Despite his closeted traits, Haruga Haruomi was still a gentleman. Hence, he took exceptional care to avoid speaking his mind.

Nervously, he ordered himself to hurry and shift his gaze away. However, Luna Francois smiled blissfully while watching Hal's behavior.

"Fufufufu. I never knew it would feel this enjoyable to be subjected to the burning gaze from the boy I like. Hey Harry, could you look at me more, pretty please? Stare intently at me like this and don't look away, as though you're trying to drill a hole into me."

"Huh!?"

"Please. I'll throw a tantrum if you look away, Harry, okay?"

"E-Even if you say that, it's still our job to observe the military exercise over there, right?"

"Don't worry. Nothing should go wrong as long as Asya is present in matters of this sort."

Making eye contact with Luna's upward gaze, Hal felt even more unsettled.

On this day in late July, the Japanese military ship carrying Hal and company was not the only one to travel to the Solomon Islands. There were two other escort vessels and a submarine accompanying them.

—And now, even more ships had gathered in these waters.

From the American navy was a cruiser, four destroyers, and a nuclear submarine.

The Australian navy had three light destroyers. Apart from that, one could see ships from various countries including Canada, Russia, Singapore, Indonesia, Korea, New Zealand, Chili...

This was a joint military exercise gathering all the member nations of the Trans-Pacific Defense Organization.

As a side note, the Americans had even dispatched an aircraft carrier whose homeport was Naval Station Pearl Harbor.

The military exercise was to last two weeks. Although it was not a live fire exercise, the participating countries had to follow the prescribed scenario and cooperate with allied ships in joint tactical maneuvers.

Hal and company were participating in the second day's schedule.

Normally in this type of exercise, the imaginary enemy—in other words, the dragons—would be played by fighter jets or unmanned drones. However, the "serpents" from various countries were taking part in the exercise today as the enemy role.

Swimming leisurely in the ocean was a gigantic sea serpent leviathan.

Other types included a white whale that one could call Moby Dick, a shark with wing-like pectoral and ventral fins, an ancient fish whose entire body was protected by armor-like scales, *etc.*

Furthermore, in the air—

There was a Garuda with golden feathers, a phoenix flying while enveloped in conflagration and other leviathans—

A blue wyvern's gigantic body was also flying in the air.

Naturally, that was Rushalka. In addition, she was in Queen Form, equipped with chest armor and arms of ruby, her entire body giving off magic more powerful than any other "serpent."

Suddenly, Rushalka began to ascend rapidly.

Not only was she increasing her altitude but also her speed gradually.

Rising from dozens of kilometers per hour to hundreds, then subsonic speeds, she soon broke the sound barrier, ascending rapidly with explosive noise and sonic booms, penetrating the clouds within the blink of an eye, disappearing from the view of Hal and the others.

At the same time as this sudden and rapid ascent—

The jet fighter squadron and many "serpents" also withdrew from the sky above Hal and company.

They must have received orders to retreat through communication devices. Apart from that, the "serpents" and their partners had keenly sensed it. Terrifying magical power of great density pervaded the area and the source was *above*.

This was the magical power radiating from Rushalka, who had disappeared to a super high altitude.

A minute or two after all irrelevant personnel in the way had gone off...

Rushalka began to descend rapidly. However, because she was in supersonic flight, it was impossible to capture her majestic flying form with the naked eye. The blue gigantic figure fell rapidly through the clouds to the tropical sea surface in a straight line, accompanied by sonic booms, making an emergency stop just before crashing into the sea—Everyone witnessed this astounding aerial mobility.

The blue wyvern's performance was not over yet.

Rushalka invoked Water pseudo-divinity while hovering at a height close to the sea surface. In the next second, the sea around Rushalka rose up in succession. Breaking established rules of physics, the huge amount of seawater

towered into the air.

Literally *pillars* of seawater, there were unbelievably eight of them.

With Rushalka in the center, the water pillars had rose up in the eight directions of north, northeast, east, southeast, south, southwest, west and northwest respectively, reaching heights of almost three hundred meters.

—In a realistic sense, this performance was completely pointless.

It was like wasting a fighter jet's mobility on fancy acrobatics.

This was pointlessly wasting Asya and Rushalka's magic power, the Queen Form's energy and pseudo-divinity.

But at the same time, this was also a fantastic feat that no other witch in the world could imitate.

Even though Luna Francois and Glinda possessed the same level of ability, what they held was the attribute of Gravity, so logically speaking, they could not exhibit the same technique. One could safely say that the image of "the spectacular revival of Europe's former Shootdown Ace" had been carved into the minds of every country's military participating in the exercise.

Furthermore, the same went for "the potency possessed by the mysterious power known as dragonbane."

"Impressive as always, that's Asya. Don't you think so too, Harry?"

"Yeah. This was the aim in coming here, after all. This performance definitely did not betray expectations. Give her my share of navy curry later—Okay!?"

In the middle of responding, Hal jumped in surprise.

Dressed in a swimsuit, Luna Francois suddenly pressed against him, Her massive bust was weighing on Hal's back. If he had to express the impression in words, it would probably include "s-so soft" and "big and round like rubber balls with plenty of elasticity."

However, Hal stood his ground and spoke as a gentleman in a trembling voice, "A-Aren't we a bit too close...?"

"Being closer is only natural, isn't it? Because you keep looking at Asya, I'm

jealous. It won't do if you won't look at me more."

"B-But Luna, you're behind me, right!? I can't see you like this at all!"

"Then hurry and turn around. Just embrace me from the front, Harry."

"Embrace!?"

If he turned around right now, the situation would turn into a passionate embrace with Luna.

Sweet temptation, like pouring honey and gomme syrup over candy, was making Hal's heart pound intensely. Just as he was about to turn around reflexively—At that very moment...

"What the hell is going on, you two!?"

An unexpected guest arrived suddenly.

Still with Luna hugging him, Hal forced his head to turn around.

Behind him, a silver-haired witch was standing sternly, glaring at the two of them sharply. Of course, her name was Anastasya Rubashvili—the girl nicknamed Asya.

"Good grief. I can't believe you were cavorting around in this kind of place while I was on the bridge to direct Rushalka... You two are outrageous!"

"Asya, 'cavorting' would be a little crude to be coming from a lady's lips."

"The one who was pressing her boobs against a boy has no right to say that to me."

Hal looked alternately between the angry Asya and the indifferent Luna while using his soup spoon.

Inside the mess hall at the escort vessel, the three of them were having a late lunch.

It was after 2pm at local time. The place was packed with people in SDF uniforms sitting around them. With the conclusion of the morning events for the second day of the joint military exercise, the crowd naturally gathered here for lunch.

Dressed in the same uniform, eating the same food.

It was like a scene from a school lunch. Being a high school student as well, Hal felt almost like he was sitting in a student cafeteria.

The main course was navy curry, a traditional menu offering passed down from the days of the Imperial Japanese Navy, plus a deep-fried chicken cutlet. Well, except that Hal's chicken cutlet had been forcibly confiscated by Asya as "an apology for all sorts of offense taken from his inappropriate behavior"...

As a side note, Luna Francois had changed back into her usual black dress.

"But even if you say my behavior was inappropriate—" Hal spoke between spoonfuls of curry.

"If I think about it more carefully, Asya, I don't think I've caused you any trouble, have I?"

"Of course you have! Witnessing you and Luna's indecent behavior, Haruomi, causes mental shock against my pure and innocent soul, which progresses to produce emotional turmoil. If that kind of scene was shown on television or in a movie, the sponsors would have protested long ago!"

"In that case, you didn't have to come along..." said Luna quietly, unfazed by Asya's angry complaints. A smile was hanging on the corners of her lips of her refreshingly beautiful face.

"According to the original plan, only Harry and I were supposed to come, you know?"

"A-Allowing you two to go out to sea alone is the kind of atrocious act that I forbid even more!"

Luna Francois was born in Oregon of the United States of America.

As a witch, whose activities were centered around the American West Coast and Hawaii, she was also the Trans-Pacific Shootdown Ace. With such accomplishments under her belt, she had built up an intimate relationship with the TPDO.

She had never missed the biennial joint military exercise held at the Solomon Islands, not even once.

On this occasion, she had invited Hal to take part together. Naturally, the purpose was not "to go out to sea alone."

By exhibiting the power of dragonbane on this kind of stage, their plans would surely reap profits in the future—

Hal agreed with Luna's view.

"Tokyo New Town would be left to Hazumi-san, Orihime-san and Asya to protect, while Harry and I use this military exercise as a public relations event with the future in mind. The distribution of roles was clearly assigned this way..."

"Personally, I'd prefer if at least one of you, Asya or Luna, could stay in New Town."

"Don't worry. If an emergency comes up, I'll tie you onto Rushalka, Haruomi, and deliver you back to Japan with priority supersonic flight."

The Solomon Islands were roughly five thousand kilometers away from Tokyo New Town.

To carry out such a long-distance voyage at supersonic speed would be an amazing feat rivaling the now discontinued supersonic passenger jet. However, it was definitely possible using Asya's magical power and Rushalka's Queen Form.

Even so, Hal could not help but mutter, "Then I'll have to endure the g-forces of supersonic flight the whole time? With a body of flesh and blood?"

"Don't worry. Given how you are now, Haruomi, you'll definitely withstand it!"

"Although that's probably true, I have to say no thanks!"

Haruga Haruomi possessed *resilience allowing him to remain unscathed even when trampled by a gigantic dragon*. Apart from that, he was also capable of guarding his physical body with imperishable protection, hence Asya's idea was quite feasible.

Nevertheless, as long as he still regarded himself as human, Hal would resist to the very end.

Moreover, the crew of the escort vessel was having lunch in the surroundings.

These SDF officers had generously accepted the three high school students who were dressed in casual clothing.

It was commonplace for those involved with witches to be exceptionally young. Furthermore, after the frequent commotions caused by dragons in Japan recently, Hal's group had become widely known among the police and the SDF as the frontline combatant witches and the "mysterious consultant" who had stepped up to resolve matters.

Perhaps due to this reason, they were received by the escort vessel's crew with much cordiality.

Today's lunch was no exception. Although Asya had not made any demands regarding her navy curry, they still treated her to *a small mountain of curry and rice on a plate twice as large as normal with three times as many cutlets layered on top.*

While savoring the crew's hospitality, Asya remarked with emotion, "Although I've spent time with various national militaries all over the world, the SDF's thoughtfulness in 'providing service without the other party asking' truly takes the cake."

"Just the fact that it doesn't feel stifling here actually makes it more comfortable than classrooms at school."

Compared to the space called the school, this place was closer to the world of Hal's childhood life.

Hence, that was why he found it more comfortable. That being said, they were going to return to Japan in a few hours.

Having made a striking impression on all the nations participating in the joint military exercise, the purpose of their journey would be considered accomplished. It would be best to hurry back home so as to reassure Orihime and Hazumi who were in charge of holding the fort.

"I wonder if there are any good souvenirs to buy around the Solomon Sea?"

After muttering to himself, Hal suddenly felt a bit perplexed.

There was a something unusual about his comment that prompted him to recall a forgotten memory—

"Hmm?"

Speaking of which, the name "Solomon" had been brought up last month.

Part 2

King Solomon—The ancient king of Israel.

His reign was said to have taken place around 1000 BCE. As the enlightened monarch who established Israel's prosperity, his name also appeared in the Old Testament of the Bible. There is one rather famous legend about him: Solomon was not only an ordinary king but also a great mage. In addition to subjugating seventy-two demons to do his bidding, he was even able to talk to animals and plants— As a side note, the Solomon Islands did not have much of a connection to this king of Israel.

The name naturally stuck only because people discovered signs of gold there and called it King Solomon's treasure.

Currently, it was the next day, back in Japan after returning from the Solomon Islands.

Under the scorching summer heat, Hal was walking in a Japanese residential district.

The boundless view of the Southern Seas was long gone. Currently, he was at Monzennaka area in the Kōtō ward.

"In other words, that questionable legend about King Solomon as 'a great mage with numerous demons under his command' was actually based on a real person. Later on, the exploits of this person somehow became mixed up with King Solomon's, thus giving rise to the legend of 'Solomon the great sorcerer.' Am I right?"

"Mm-hmm. Basically."

What answered Hal's whispers was Hinokagutsuchi's voice.

She had not materialized. The former dragon king's ghost simply spoke in Hal's ear to carry out the conversation. Fortunately, there were few people nearby, but from a bystander's point of view, it would have been rather

disturbing.

"Also, I remember you mentioning last month about wanting 'to have the man named "Solomon" resurrected in the modern era.' What did you mean by that?"

The trip to the Solomon Islands had prompted Hal to remember what the former dragon king had said. Ever since, he would seek out Hinokagutsuchi to talk on every occasion, trying to get information about "Solomon."

"Well, that goal can be considered half complete already."

"Complete?"

"Mm-hmm. The man facing similar circumstances as the ancient Solomon has already been born."

There was laughter mixed in Hinokagutsuchi's voice.

However, it was the tasteless laughter of someone whose irresponsible joy was founded upon another's misfortune.

"He was a Tyrannos too. Obtaining the power of dragonbane as a mere human and even gradually mastering its use—Going as far as to make dozens of 'imitation' dragons his minions."

"...In other words, my predecessor."

"Rejoice. Know that you are the human who has attained heights closest to Solomon for the past millennia. The vast majority of the Tyrannoi end up dying out on the field or turning into a dragon before that."

"....."

If Hal were to continue using the power of dragonslaying, he would transform into a dragon one day—

Recalling this, Hal sighed lightly. Although this was not a problem that could be solved by agonizing over it, if possible, he did wish to avoid such a fate.

"Judging from your case, it could be said that Solomon's legacy has benefitted you substantially."

"King Solomon's legacy? I have something like that in my possession?"

"What are you talking about? The 'imitations' used by contemporary humans —The methods to bring about their birth are precisely the mystic rites compiled by Solomon, thousands of years ago, by imitating dragonkind's arcane techniques."

"...The ritual for leviathan synthesis, huh!?"

At the Izu shore, they had encountered a dragon subspecies.

It was supposedly created by elite dragons using magic. So the two systems of synthesis came from the same origin.

And the one linking the two together was Solomon the great mage—

"Those who know of Solomon's exploits are few in number nowadays. Back when I was still a dragon king, many magi and priestesses idolized him."

"Well, excessive fame would make it seem shady instead."

Hal remarked with poignancy.

Ever since the time of ancient Greece, many "grimoires of King Solomon" had circulated, such as *The Greater Key of Solomon*, *The Lesser Key of Solomon*, *The Testament of Solomon*, *The Key of True Solomon*, *Armandal*, etc...

Anyone with some interest in the occult would have heard of these titles, to greater or lesser extents, even if they were not experts on the subject of magic.

However, the contents of these books were absurd for the most part and ridiculed as the likes of idle gossip.

In fact, if experts like Hal were to see advertising along the lines of "the super grimoire of the great mage King Solomon!", they would likely laugh or grimace.

"Actually, a thousand years ago, I listened to a certain female mage's lifelong wish at the Dragon Palace Court—'O great Crimson Queen, I implore you to lend your divine assistance to resurrect Solomon the progenitor' or some such."

However—Hinokagutsuchi continued.

Before she could answer yes or no, the petitioner died first. It turned out that she had been tirelessly searching for King Solomon's magical secrets, dedicating her body and soul to reviving the path of unorthodoxy, despite being afflicted

with a fatal disease.

"You're still remembering this? After all this time?"

Hinokagutsuchi's calm tone of voice naturally drew Hal into this topic.

"Mm-hmm. Perhaps her endearing face and seductive waist had something to do with it—Possibly."

"You're talking like one of those despicable pervert fathers, you know!?"

"Well, during this time, I have become old, experiencing a thousand years as a spirit. By the time I realized, the dragons that were supposed to be sleeping had already danced merrily back to earth, to extol springtime to their hearts' content. As for humans, I am afraid they will gradually decline and eventually exit the stage at this rate."

"....."

"That being said, it would be far too boring without the soothing sight of voluptuous maidens. Hence, an idea came to me. Suppose an opportunity were to present itself one day, I would bestow the Rune of the Bow upon a suitable human. It would be interesting if a lifelong wish requested of me in the past were to be accomplished now, a thousand years later."

"...I see."

To think there was such dramatic significance behind the dragonslaying rune he had inherited.

Hal could not help but feel overwhelmed with emotion. The greatest reason why he had survived till now was unbelievably due to a former dragon's king's momentary lustful whim.

"By the way, I can't believe it's Solomon. It's too ridiculous as magic-related information. Even professional treasure hunters like me have never investigated it seriously..."

Rather, amateur occult enthusiasts would be the ones to swarm all over it.

For an insider like Hal, it was too lowbrow a topic. Taking it seriously would feel embarrassing, which was why no one took the first step.

"Now for a change of pace, I'll muster up some of my true skills to check it out."

"Speaking of clues regarding Solomon, perhaps there is one that might be unexpectedly close by in your surroundings."

"What do you mean by that?"

While Hal was reeling from surprise at the sudden hint, Hinokagutsuchi said, "The flint in your possession was hidden by your father, wasn't it? Nevertheless, it is extremely rare for people to understand the value of that stone, even among those pursuing the path of unorthodoxy. The rare exceptions are limited to magi related to Solomon's lineage."

In other words—Hal suddenly realized what the self-styled devil was implying.

"Y-You mean that Pops was related to King Solomon?"

"Mm-hmm. Although it was a thousand years ago, back then, there was a mage cult that had inherited Solomon's magic and knowledge. Within their ranks were a few outstanding magi who regarded Solomon with adoring devotion."

"....."

"Perhaps your father was someone like that."

"Although Pops definitely knew how to use magic, he was at most the same level as me before I received the rune."

Indeed. Hal's father, Haruga Takafumi, was not a practitioner despite being a researcher of magic.

Apart from that, he was also a treasure hunter well-versed in history, archaeology, comparative cultural studies and mythology.

Well, despite all these shady titles, he was probably not a "mage who venerated King Solomon as his spiritual mentor," otherwise Hal would have known something about it no matter what as his son.

"....."

Hal thought deeply for a moment before taking out his cellphone.

While walking, he slid his thumb across the screen to type out a message. After selecting a few recipients, he sent out the email—He had nothing to lose even in the event of failure, after all. This bit of spent effort did not count as a waste of time even if it proved fruitless.

While thinking over these matters, Hal also reached his destination.

A place he had visited three months ago. He was standing in front of a samurai residence he had come to pay a visit with Asya before—The entrance of the Juujouji home.

Hal pressed the doorbell and waited for a while.

After a brief wait at the samurai residence's entrance, his friends, two young maidens, came out to greet him.

"Welcome back, Senpai!"

"Although you probably know this already, Japan has been very peaceful while you were gone."

Walking over to him with a radiant smile was Shirasaka Hazumi. The other girl—Juujouji Orihime—was also smiling cheerfully as usual.

This combination consisted of the two most heartwarming witches Hal knew.

"You came too, Shirasaka."

"Yes. Because I heard you were coming to Nee-sama's house... I ran over."

Hazumi replied with a bright smile, slightly mischievously.

Hal nodded. This was a very welcome surprise. After all, Shirasaka Hazumi was the one and only "adorable junior of Haruga Haruomi."

"Great, I happened to have brought souvenirs for you too, Shirasaka."

"Really!? Thank you, Senpai!"

"In other words, Haruga-kun, about the task mentioned earlier—"

"Yeah, it's done. I definitely bought stuff at local shops."

Facing Orihime who was looking at him mischievously, Hal replied.

This was something he had promised her before setting off to the Solomon Islands.

'Time permitting, I hope you could bring back some local specialties, since Hazumi especially likes receiving souvenirs from abroad and things of that sort.'

As a witch, Shirasaka Hazumi had been shouldering the responsibility of protecting Tokyo New Town ever since childhood.

Due to a chronic lack of people capable of taking her place, she had to live a life of restricted travel. Naturally, she had no experience traveling abroad either.

After hearing about that, Hal decided he had to bring back souvenirs no matter what hurdles he must overcome.

Right before making the journey back to Japan, the military had transported Hal and company via helicopter to the Port Moresby airport on the island of New Guinea. Using the three hour layover before their civilian flight was going to takeoff, Hal had gone shopping at a local open-air market.

There, he had bought strange masks carved from wood, bags woven from wooden fibers, *etc.*

Orihime winked cheerfully in response.

"Wonderful. Given that it's you, Haruga-kun, I was originally worried whether you would forget to buy gifts and end up with no choice but to pick up cookies at Haneda or Narita airport to complete the task."

"D-Don't look down on me. This sort of favor is just a piece of cake," Hal replied with a slightly guilty conscience.

In fact, he remembered past instances when he had done exactly what Orihime had speculated. Rather, it would be better say that the action of "buying gifts" itself was something that he frequently forgot completely during his travels.

Simply poor at social skills and being used to his life of flying all over the world without a fixed residence were presumably the reasons for this.

It was probably with this personality of Hal's in mind that Orihime had

tactfully reminded him before he departed. Her thoughtfulness was meticulous as always.

Even so—Hal suddenly found it incredible.

It was something that happened the day before his expedition when he had met up with Orihime alone and the topic of souvenirs came up.

Hal had told her: Due to work reasons, I have to stay at the Solomon Islands for five days with Luna starting tomorrow. Back then, Orihime had froze for a moment in surprise before— 'J-Just you and Luna-san, the two of you, alone...?'

She had asked timidly in a feeble voice.

Her seemingly fearful appearance did not resemble her usual self, which was cheerful and outgoing. Until he answered that Asya was going too, only then did she finally seem reassured...

Despite having acted that way, Orihime had greeted Hal with cheerfulness rivaling the summer sun just now.

"By the way, I did as you asked earlier and informed my grandfather of your arrival. However, his reaction was somewhat strange."

"Strange?"

"Ah yes. When Nee-sama passed on the message that you had something important to discuss with him, Senpai, Grandfather Juujouji immediately entered a bad mood."

Orihime and Hazumi had reported an important finding. Hal could not help but tilted his head after listening.

Could he have done something wrong and angered him? Yet today's main purpose was to have a meeting with Juujouji's grandfather. In any case, he had no way of figuring out anything without meeting in person.

Hal then asked the two girls to lead him into the house.

Prior to Orihime becoming a witch, Hal had visited this Japanese-style room as a member of SAURU staff.

The master of the Juujouji household was waiting inside. Last time, he had worn a solemn and dignified kimono and this occasion was no exception. The only difference was the fabric, which had changed to linen for greater breathability in summer.

Hal, Orihime and Hazumi sat formally in seiza opposite him across the table.

Orihime's grandfather spoke with severe displeasure right from the start.

"Let me make myself clear first. I shall not hand my granddaughter over to you."

"What?"

"....."

"....."

Cough cough. Hal cleared his throat.

"Excuse me, is there some kind of misunderstanding here?"

"You said you had 'an important matter' to discuss today, didn't you? To announce this before hand then pay a visit to my home alone... In that case, there can be only one possibility."

This was his reason for getting angry?

Hal subconsciously looked at Orihime, who responded with her eyes.

(My apologies, my grandfather keeps saying strange things...)

(He's an old man who's overprotective of his granddaughter as always. Sigh, anyway, I guess I'll just have to try to start the conversation.) (Yes, let's do that. I will assist you as much as possible.)

Simply by observing each other's eyes and facial expression, it felt as though they could communicate telepathically.

Was this a reward earned through surviving many life and death situations together, or had some kind of bond formed between him and Orihime? Even without words, it felt like they could convey their thoughts to each other.

Discovering this fact, Hal smiled wryly while Orihime beamed.

"Please listen to me, Grandfather. You've made a mistake. Haruga-kun is simply here to talk business."

"Y-You are telling me that now, after exchanging flirtatious gazes with him in front of me!?"

"No, Juujouji is telling the truth. Actually, I will be quitting SAURU officially in the future to start a new company in partnership with my friends."

Hal put away his business smile and spoke sincerely.

"I will be offering a proposal to the various businesses and authorities that have been longtime sponsors of the Tokyo New Town witches—Juujouji Orihime and Shirasaka Hazumi. In the future, they could choose to hire us to carry out part of the witch support business currently undertaken through SAURU... Or rather, all of it."

Orihime's grandfather was not simply "an old man who was overprotective of his granddaughter."

Having held important posts at many publicly traded corporations in the past, he still kept his status as a part-time consultant. Not only was he a local celebrity but also a member of the committee sponsoring Orihime and Hazumi.

As expected, he immediately sat up straight after hearing Hal's proposal.

"Why this sudden decision?"

"Have you glanced over the report that Asya and I wrote? It's the result of our discussion about how to make better and more meaningful use of the currently discovered dragonslaying magic that still falls under personal property. If it's a good time for you, I actually plan on explaining it to you."

"....."

Orihime's grandfather thought deeply for a while then spoke slowly, "Tell me in detail. The various disturbances happening around New Town recently have already become a problem for us."

Part 3

It was afternoon on August 1, considered the official start of the summer vacation.

Mixed among the students who were attending club activities diligently in the middle of holidays, Hal made his way to Kogetsu Academy.

He was visiting the Witch Mansion's temporary underground location beneath the library. As soon as he entered the spacious room that was being used as a conference room, he noticed that all of his companions had already assembled.

"Now that Haruga-kun has arrived, I think it's time we got started, right? Everyone, let's begin the fourth meeting regarding the GUILD project's operation."

The female student serving as the facilitator, Mutou-san, announced in a relaxed tone of voice.

Applause—The girl with the twintails, Funaki-san, clapped her hands in response. Sitting next to her, Orihime and Hazumi also applauded. As for the professionals, Hal, Asya and Luna Francois, they went through the motions of clapping at least.

Although the members of the group were not in sync at all, it should be fine.

After all, the purpose of their gathering was not to go for karaoke after school.

"Anyway, let me start."

While saying that, Mutou-san opened up her personal laptop.

"This is the project plan I sent to all of you through email this morning. It's pretty much 'preparations for the imminent day of information disclosure.' Has anyone read it yet?"

"I've glanced through it."

It was Asya who raised her hand.

"I think the plan itself is quite good. And making effective use of the social connections cultivated through the UFO Research Club's activities is also an interesting idea. However, I was hoping for something packing more of a punch..."

"A punch?"

"Actually, I agree with Asya. I believe that we need more eye-catching content, or an idol character to focus everyone's attention."

While Mutou-san was taken aback, Luna Francois shared her opinion.

"Think about it. Not long after the return of dragons, all humans of the world were shocked by the televised video of 'the speech delivered by Hannibal, the representative of dragonkind,' weren't they?"

"Oh, that's the dragon that descended on the Rockefeller Center, right!?"

"Thanks to that, information about dragonkind was spread rapidly throughout the world."

"I see—Now that you mention it, that video's view count has accumulated to unbelievable levels now..."

Mutou-san crossed her arms and began to contemplate.

Next to speak after her was Hal. He asked Funaki-san, "About Pavel Galad—the dragon that transformed into a handsome guy—that you witnessed at Kanegafuchi last month, did you ever see him again?"

"Nope, never again. However, it seems like he's made several appearances in that area since then."

"Really!? How do you know?"

Hal leaned forward due to this unexpected news. Funaki-san laughed "fufu."

"I tried asking around near Kanegafuchi Station. After all, he's a conspicuous silver-haired foreigner. I went around and inquired 'Have you seen a hottie like him~?' and ended up with quite a lot of eyewitness accounts, mostly provided by women. I'll show you the results of the investigation in my notebook later."

"That's amazing. You're such a great help."

Funaki-san was a lively girl who loved gossip and juicy news.

Evidently, she possessed initiative and investigative ability beyond Hal's expectations. Although his original intention was merely to hire her to handle administrative matters, Hal had unintentionally secured a talented individual.

"Why not have her go with the UFO Research Club's Sakuraba-senpai to search for Galad together? I think if we just obtain some slightly more precise intel, we can leave the rest to the police..." Hal muttered.

Gathering information about dragonkind, to disclose to the general public—

This was the UFO Research Club's primary activity. And the member who stood as the club's information gathering expert was someone known as Sakuraba-senpai. He was apparently carrying out his "activities" diligently outside of school every day, which was why it was hard to find him on campus. Even Hal had never met him before.

However, Hal was finally able to obtain his contact details through Mutou-san and President M.

Someone capable of obtaining undisclosed images of leviathans through specific channels would definitely be quite reliable if he could recruit such a person to their cause.

Hal expected an audio recording of this meeting to be passed along to Sakuraba-senpai afterwards.

"By the way, about the audio records of this meeting—"

"I am in charge of that, Senpai!"

Hal allowed his sudden thought to slip out of his mouth and Hazumi immediately responded with a smile.

She had her notebook open and was writing down all kinds of things in an organized manner. A portable audio recorder was next to her hand. As Hal's assistant, she had everything meticulously prepared.

"Oh right, I have a message to pass to you, Haruga-kun."

This time, it was Orihime's turn to speak.

"A message from President M: 'Going all the way down to the basement is too much work. Just send the minutes over!' That's what she said. 'I will watch over you no matter what needs to be done, so go ahead and do it with no regrets!' She also said that."

"...Feels like a guardian angel and protective spirit combined, how reliable... I guess?"

He had tried approaching President M without expecting much, but the president ended up promising support.

Even without being present, her(?) suspicious repertoire of skills, open-mindedness and competence were still quite reliable. Hal's team lineup was gradually filling out.

At that moment, the conference room's door opened with a click.

"—Hello everyone, I've brought refreshments for you."

A rare visitor entered, carrying a convenience store bag.

It was a beautiful woman whose glasses matched her intellectual appearance very well. Having been promoted to the post of SAURU's Kantou branch chief, Hiiragi Yukari had gone out of her way to make a visit from the Yokohama branch between tasks.

Hiiragi-san put down the convenience store bag on the table where Hal's group was gathered around.

Inside was a two liter bottle of oolong tea, paper cups, several cans of coffee, snacks, *etc.* Then on the table, she placed a paper bag she had been carrying in her other hand.

This bag contained roasted rice crackers and had the words "roasted by hand on a coal flame" written on it.

"This is from Kenjou. I made a detour to the Mirokudou New Town branch just now and he specifically asked me to bring these along as an apology since he could not attend this meeting. He also asked me to send his regards to all of you."

Indeed, their lineup was gradually filling up.

When Hal shared his ideas with acquaintances inside SAURU, many of them ended up voicing their support. Furthermore, Hiiragi-san and Kenjou-san had promised to maintain confidentiality until the time was ripe. After swearing an oath using the magic of Contract in God's Presence, they agreed to join as well.

Hal and company's plan was advancing surely and steadily.

That being said, the end goal was still very distant and there was no guarantee at all that he could follow it all the way to completion. Besides, there was still a rather challenging problem at hand.

The white dragon king—Princess Yukikaze. She was definitely not going to remain aboveboard indefinitely as now—

"...Looks like there's no need to collect more weapons for the time being. I have to catch up on other aspects first..."

Instead of speaking out loudly, Hal was muttering to himself.

Last time, he had obtained the Rune of the Twin Katana in the Izu waters. Having retrieved the *aforementioned rune* in secret, his dragonslaying runes were probably of sufficient quantity.

What he needed to accomplish now was a new mission whose importance was only secondary to the search for weapons.

After the meeting ended, Asya made her way to the Literature Club's room.

Her purpose was to meet President M. She was going unaccompanied. The other members had already departed.

The group had decided to get together for dinner. With Orihime and Hazumi present too, there was no need to worry about Luna taking Hal away...

"President, I've brought the minutes and the audio record of the meeting."

"Put it over there first. It's been a while. How have things been lately?"

The setting sun's rays were streaming in through the window, turning the Literature Club's room into a shade of orange.

President M was standing by the window. Her massive body, 140kg by visual estimates, was clad in what resembled a crimson maternity dress.

"A few days ago, you said on the phone that the girl called Luna has started charging around in a reckless manner recently, right?"

"Exactly! I really don't get how the gears of destiny turn. Luna suddenly said she l-l-l-likes Haruomi. It's terrible!"

Seizing the opportunity, Asya began to gripe all at once.

"Dragging Haruomi out on any pretext, she's thoroughly pursuing the tactic of spending time alone together!"

"Endlessly spamming the special attack that you want but isn't available to you, I see."

"Gyah!?"

"I originally thought that the romantic comedy situation surrounding Haruga would be stuck in a stalemate with Princess Orihime in the lead, but never did I expect a black ship to arrive. At this rate, that Haruga's going to be snatched away."

"W-What makes you say that!?"

"A power play from seductive flesh imported directly from America, plus the fact that he's a lecher."

"Ehhhhhhhhh!?"

"The only hope is for the hitherto laid back princess to awaken because an unexpected rival had shown up. As for the little angel, she is at a bodily disadvantage no matter what."

"P-President, what if I could rise to the forefront now as the childhood friend —"

"Isn't that impossible? Completely hopeless. Look, here's the principle. No matter what you multiply zero by, the result is always zero. This is the law of multiplication."

"No way! Then what's the point of all the special training I've been doing till

now!?"

"But you have truly made no progress... I am astounded by your incompetence."

"Ooooooooooh!"

President M's accusation was quite harsh. Asya had some self-awareness too.

"However, your tireless perseverance is one of your strong points. Even now, you are carrying out some type of plan to oppose that American girl, aren't you?"

"Y-Yes. Actually, it's to prevent Luna from monopolizing an unchallenged position."

Only now did Asya puff out her chest in pride.

"Luna has been using a hotel suite as her residence all this time, so I barged in to make my home there! This way, I can stop Luna from doing sneaky things at night!"

"You fool. If you're going to stay at someone's place, why not move into the Haruga home directly?"

"Huh?"

"Isn't that a staple in juvenile novels aimed at inexperienced teenage boys? A cute girl invades the male character's home, thus imposing cohabitation by force. You could do the same thing and be done with it."

"....."

Listening, Asya felt that things were precisely how President M described them.

However, Asya still argued back as a maiden with a bottom line that must not be crossed no matter what.

"Th-That approach—feels repulsive after all. Invading a boy's home to live there tyrannically, that kind of thing..."

Saying that, Asya began to feel embarrassed, meanwhile feeling her cheeks turn red.

"I still think this is something that's only allowed after engagement or marriage!"

"I can't believe you're speaking like a pure and innocent main heroine when you're clearly in no position that could afford the luxury of making such statements..."

"B-But I am undoubtedly the pure and innocent main heroine, you know!?"

"Wrong. Wrong. Currently, you are undoubtedly a clownish variety idol."

"I-I can't believe you're using the twentieth-century term 'variety idol' to describe a maiden in the flower of youth!?"

"In your case, you might be better off with a case of amnesia."

"Huh?"

"Think about it. The situation started to shift dramatically in *Madan no Ou* ever since T●gre lost his memory and went missing. Despite being in a completely reset state, T●gre was able to cultivate a relationship with Elizaveta at his usual pace, even conquering ×× on the side (note: Volume 9 events)."

"I-I somehow get the feeling you're alluding to a different dimension!?"

"Anyway, that's that. The situation will only grow worse if you lack the resolve necessary to turn the current situation completely upside down. Without the slightest doubt, I dare assert that."

"....."

Completely reset—Just as Asya was feeling shocked by these words...

The cellphone in her pocket suddenly sounded with a message alert. Feeling completely exhausted by the continually shocking conversation, she took out her phone almost unconsciously.

Asya checked the email and reacted with surprise.

"Mom is coming to Tokyo?"

Part 4

"It's been a while, Haruomi-san. I'm glad to see Asya in such good health too."

These were Auntie Yulia's first words upon meeting Hal again after many years.

Prior to the reunion, all she had sent was a brief message stating "Heading to Tokyo tomorrow, scheduled to arrive at 11:17 at Haneda."

This message had been received on Hal and Asya's cellphones merely eighteen hours prior. As a side note, almost all of what used to be the heart of former Tokyo had been taken as territory for the Old Tokyo Concession, although the airport-less Ōta ward was excluded.

Currently, Hal and his childhood friend were sitting in a cafe inside Haneda airport.

Seated across the table and the three cups of coffee was a silver-haired woman.

Her name was Yulia Rubashvili.

In other words, Asya's mother. On top of her t-shirt, she was wearing a khaki short sleeve military shirt. On the bottom, she had a pair of black jeans. Draped over her shoulders, the light shawl accentuated her womanly charm.

"Please don't suddenly announce you're visiting the next day just like that. It's not like we're free every day either."

"Sorry, Asya. It's because the idea of making a visit only occurred to me suddenly yesterday morning."

Yulia replied calmly to her grumbling daughter.

Her voice and tone were so calm that some people might actually believe it if one were to describe her as a combat android from the future. Then there was her exquisite face. Sitting opposite this "auntie" who was present with her daughter, Hal kept thinking to himself what a beauty she was.

Not only were Asya and Auntie Yulia daughter and mother, but they also bore a strong resemblance.

Their faces could even be described as identical. Both of them possessed beautiful faces reminiscent of fairies, dreamy and delicate, combined with petite and slender figures, as well as gorgeous silver hair rich with vibes of fantasy— However, there was a decisive difference between the two of them.

This was the fact that Auntie Yulia was a genuine cool beauty through and through.

Precisely at that moment, a middle-aged waiter brought their orders.

Pancakes, a hamburger, a club sandwich, a mille crepe, and a hot dog. Incidentally, only the hot dog at the end was what Hal had ordered to serve as a late breakfast. The rest were all Asya's orders.



After lowering her gaze to glance over this food, Auntie Yulia immediately said, "Asya, your appetite is hearty as ever."

"Don't worry. After all, a witch's job is very calorie intensive."

"Indeed, what you say is correct. Then keep eating at this rate, since all of it is for the sake of surviving the present, in order to pluck the fruit of victory in the future."

Auntie Yulia was a researcher at SAURU's headquarters in Istanbul.

Hal had heard that she used to belong to the air force of Europe's defense organization before giving birth to Asya, reaching the rank of major prior to her retirement.

As a result, she would sometimes speak with inexplicable strictness.

Encouraged by such a mother, Asya's eyes instantly lit up.

"As expected of you, Mom, you understand me best!"

"As for the price to be paid, perhaps you will have to bear the risk of ending up with your grandmother's obese figure. Well, this is theoretically unavoidable. I also believe that there is no need to sacrifice combat potential for the sake of dieting. Oh, but Asya, you must take precautions against diabetes—"

"D-Don't list out these potential risks if you're going to encourage me to eat more!"

Hal observed the mother and daughter's conversation while eating his hot dog.

He had set off from his home at Narihira Bridge without eating breakfast this morning, hence this was his first meal of the day. Come to think of it, Auntie Yulia's age was still impossible to guess from appearance.

With her fifteen-year-old daughter by her side, they looked like sisters.

To be honest, she was a woman who surpassed Asya in terms of the "Fairy Index."

"By the way, Auntie Yulia, you were on a business trip in Indonesia until yesterday, right? Is that why you took the chance to visit Tokyo New Town while you were at it?"

"Indeed. You are very up-to-date, Haruomi-san."

"Even as her daughter, I haven't heard about this."

"It's nothing really, because it was written in the fan club's newsletter. Auntie Yulia had already arrived at the Jakarta branch last week."

"E-Even you, Haruomi, have joined that suspicious club!?"

"How troubling. To think that I'm being treated as a celebrity when I am nothing more than an ordinary SAURU researcher. Frankly speaking, this is quite problematic for me."

"After all, Auntie Yulia, you're not only pretty but also a wonderful person too."

Seventy-eight SAURU members across the world had joined the "Club of Unlimited Support for the Exquisitely Beautiful Ms. Yulia." In fact, Hal had already joined as a member five years ago.

Hal put on a serious expression then said, "There are quite a lot of people who want Auntie to step on them or give them cold stares."

"How very troubling..."

"Gah. I-In that case, why don't they praise the daughter who is younger and more tender, or treat me like an idol? The men of SAURU are seriously blind!"

"Well then, I think it's time for me to get going."

There should be plenty of catching up between mother and daughter. Hal tried to show his considerate side, but Auntie Yulia shook her head and suddenly said, "Haruomi-san, this visit of mine to Tokyo actually includes business with you."

"Huh?"

"Didn't you send me an email a while ago? 'I hope you could provide details if you happen to know about the King Solomon case my father handled in the past.'"

" "——!" "

Hal and Asya gasped in unison.

After all, their families had been acquainted for generations. Asya's

grandmother and her deceased father both knew Hal and his father.

To think that a source of information would immediately fly to him from nearby like the proverbial blue bird of fortune—

Auntie Yulia began to explain patiently...

"The problem with Asya is that even if you try to knock her out with a sedative, she'd detect it through taste and scent. She's almost like a wild beast."

The location was the luxury hotel where Luna Francois made her residence.

Hal was seated facing her in a lounge at this hotel. Hal had ordered a coffee while Luna had grapefruit juice. The two of them had picked table seating. It was after 7pm and if Hal and Luna were adults, they would probably be sitting side by side next to the window, drinking alcoholic beverages at this hour.

Unfortunately, both of them were still minors.

"There has been more than one occasion when I wanted to mix sleep medication into Asya's food so that I could invite you out for an evening spin while she was sleeping. However, I always dismissed the notion due to the high probability of futility. Whatever, there is no shortage of measures as long as I get serious, after all."

"Hahahaha..."

Hal laughed dryly. If chances of success were fifty-fifty, Luna Francois would definitely drug Asya without any hesitation.

"However, you are at fault too, Harry."

"Me?"

"Yes. I've clearly confessed my feelings to you, haven't I? Besides, we can immediately become a couple as soon as you consent. With that, a mere childhood friend like Asya will have neither right nor reason to interfere."

"....."

"It's all because you're imitating the romantic comedy staple of withholding your answer indecisively. That's why Asya could seize the opportunity to start

interfering."

"Speaking of which, she's been staying at your place for now, right?"

"Although I could refuse and ask her to leave, the most that would accomplish is drive her over to the suite adjacent to mine. Since it's too much trouble, I tolerated her."

Just like Luna Francois, Asya was also a master-class witch.

Due to the financial compensation for their battle accomplishments so far, they had accumulated massive funds (Luna's level could even be called "an estate"). Even willfully splurging on expensive suites at luxury hotels would not cause much of a burden.

Hal could not help but tilt his head.

"Why is that girl Asya so intent on hindering you, Luna? Even when I asked her, all I got for an answer was that she had to keep the reason a secret from me."

"Ah wonduh whahy? How baffling, ah dudn geddit either."

"Hmm? Were you speaking a bit strangely just now?"

"Nope. You imagined it, Harry♪"

After chuckling with an impish smile, Luna Francois leaned forward.

"So, what did you figure out after talking to Asya's mother? You met up this morning, didn't you?"

"Nothing much, I tried asking about the whole story of how Pops got his hands on the flint... Turns out it wasn't a spectacular adventure story like Indiana Jones at all."

Shrugging, Hal began to recount.

—It happened to have taken place during the year 2000 CE exactly.

That was when dragonkind had recently returned to earth. Hal's father and Auntie Yulia were working at SAURU's New York branch. One day, the branch staff discovered a set of ancient artifacts named the "the posthumous writings of the great mage, King Solomon, and the cursed stone."

The one who deciphered Solomon's posthumous writings would be able to inherit the king's fortune.

The stone was a key leading to great power. Dragons would tear the holder apart. Hence, confidentiality was paramount.

...It sounded like a very fake advertisement.

No magical power could be detected from either the document regarded as Solomon's posthumous writings or the accompanying stone. Even so, Hal's father and Auntie Yulia still went through with the appraisal process just in case.

On that day, New York proceeded to be assaulted by numerous dragons.

"The Great Attack in the Year 2000... refers to that?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Leading his Army of Fire composed of a thousand Raptors, Hannibal arrived at New York by air, delivering a devastating blow to the US military in that attack."

Hal nodded in confirmation to Luna Francois' question.

"Incinerated by the flames of war, Manhattan Island was directly annexed by Hannibal to become his territory, thus giving rise to the Old Manhattan Concession."

"The so-called 'Great Attack' was quite a dramatic situation in and of itself."

"Yeah. After that, Pops and Auntie Yulia fled in desperation with only their personal belongings to evacuate from the streets that were under attack from Raptors. Back then, Pops happened to take that Solomon's stone by chance, which is also the flint I came across twenty years later."

Indeed. This was the secret stone hidden inside the Clockwork Mage.

"During their escape, Pops and Auntie Yulia were pursued relentlessly by a Raptor, unable to shake it off despite using stealth magic many times. Only after making their getaway successfully at last did they begin to suspect—Perhaps this was due to that 'dragons would tear the holder apart' curse."

As the story went, the stone was handed over to Hal's father in the end, who promised to contact Auntie Yulia immediately if he discovered anything.

"However, many years passed after that but Pops never initiated contact about the matter. Auntie Yulia completely forgot about it too."

Hal had previously tried to gather information about the flint—He wrote emails to those acquainted with his father.

But in the end, no one responded, not even Auntie Yulia. Simply mentioning "his father had hidden a stone belonging to the dragons" as a clue was not enough to jog Auntie Yulia's memory.

However, thanks to the "Solomon" keyword this time, his investigation did not run into the same problem...

"What follows is just my speculation. I think Pops probably kept that stone by his side to observe—And ended up with no results, which is why he didn't leave behind any information about the flint."

"Then why did he hide the stone in his pocket watch?"

"Because Pops has a finicky tendency just like me. He tried to obey the legend and hide the stone, so on a playful whim, he chose to hide it in his pocket watch, then he probably forgot all about it."

Hal brought up his unfounded speculation.

But considering his father's personality, his hunch was very likely to be correct.

"If he was seriously trying to hide it, he would've picked a safer and more secure hiding place. If he seriously considered it worthy of research, he would've left complete records behind at least."

"Speaking of which, Harry, there's one detail that I find concerning."

Luna Francois interjected at that moment.

"According to the current theory, the other artifact left behind at the SAURU branch in Old Manhattan... is very likely to be King Solomon's posthumous writings, is that right?"

"Yeah, I'd bet on it."

In fact, he had been reviewing satellite images with Asya this afternoon.

This was the latest photographic data of the Old Manhattan Concession taken by spy satellite. Standing tall silently in the Upper East Side area, it had escaped destruction from dragonkind's fires...

Luna's eyes instantly lit up after hearing about it.

"Then we must set off on an expedition to Old Manhattan. Obtaining King Solomon's fortune, which stood equal to the flint, should bring benefits without drawbacks."

"Yeah, you're right."

"For the past few months, our combat potential has increased dramatically... But still, it is not enough to take dragon king-class opponents head on. It is necessary to keep gaining experience to strengthen our combat power."

"Perhaps you're right."

Hal agreed with Luna from the bottom of his heart.

Truth be told, he had no confidence in securing a draw if he were to face Princess Yukikaze in a rematch. He barely survived the June battle only thanks to deploying the Crimson Queen as a surprise factor.

"Since weapon quantity has progressed swimmingly, it's time to trigger events like spectacular attack spells or ultimate summoned contracted beasts, etc."

"Yes, in order to pursue such possibilities, King Solomon's fortune is ultimately —"

"I'd really like to get my hands on it before the others. But the fact that the treasure is located at the Old Manhattan Concession would be a risk factor."

Hal muttered and Luna Francois responded with a smile.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained, Harry. Commit your determination and let us head out on an expedition to America? How about stopping by the West Coast along the way and make an appearance at my house?"

"Oh... Actually, about that..."

Hal found himself at a loss for words momentarily, unable to bring up his core purpose in visiting Luna tonight.

"I hope you could stay in Tokyo New Town, Luna."

"Eh!? What do you mean by that, Harry!?"

"Old Manhattan is considered the most dangerous zone even among concession territories. Old Tokyo can't compare to it at all. If we're going to infiltrate it, Asya and I should be the ones to do it, just the two of us. In addition, there's no telling how long we have to be away from Tokyo... It wouldn't be good idea if both you and Asya were out of the country."

Through the Izu expedition earlier, Hal understood that Luna Francois was not the physical type.

In a situation where demands on stealth movement, survival skills, mobility and magic must all be met, the Asya-Hal combination would be the ideal choice. Conversely, if *one of the two* had to stay behind to defend Tokyo, Luna was also more suitable than the Georgian girl.

Not only did she wield a witch's power but also influence as a SAURU cadre.

Apart from that, she was a strong negotiator stemming from her ability to make judgment calls accounting for the big picture. Perhaps realizing it herself, Luna murmured glumly, "Well, since one of us must remain behind, I am confident that I could do a better job than Asya... However, Harry, this is a rare chance to go traveling!"

"A-Although it's traveling, it's also a business trip at the same time."

"Hmph. In any case, you're asking me to hold the fort with Orihime-san and Hazumi-san, aren't you?"

"As for that... Since it's a rare chance to visit the East Coast, I plan on bringing Juujouji and Shirasaka along. Making a trip to *Salem* should be a good experience for them."

"...!?"

A vortex of anger suddenly swirled in Luna's blue eyes—but it lasted only an instant before returning to the shine of rationality. Looking at Hal with a challenging gaze, she said in a sulk, "Then in that case, Harry, I will obey you if you give me a present right now."

"Huh, a present?"

"Yes, an advance reward for me, who will be holding the fort alone."

"Even if you tell me that suddenly... I don't know what to give you."

"It's very simple—If I do this, you ought to understand, right?"

Currently, the two of them were conversing with a low table between them.

Luna Francois suddenly drew her face up close to Hal's face. Then she closed her eyes, presenting her adorable and beautiful face in a seductive and vulnerable display!

"!?"

"Hurry up, Harry. Give me my reward kiss."

"R-Right here!?"

"Yes. Haven't the two of us done something similar not too long ago? Don't worry."

"B-But there are people around. And besides, we're not dating."

"It is a reward precisely because there are people watching. Besides, this has nothing to do with dating or not. I have already gone as far as to grant you permission."

Hal still faltered. Although guests at a hotel lounge at 7pm were not numerous, they were not absent either. In addition, there were three or four members staff on standby...

However, a voice surfaced in his heart.

—Unless Luna is satisfied, she won't agree to staying behind on defense duty. She might even take a flight to the East Coast in pursuit...



Armed with this theoretical backing, Hal was coerced into complying.

Timidly, he approached Luna's beautiful face and planted a kiss gently on her

lips.

At that very moment, it became Luna Francois' turn to attack. She sucked and pecked Hal's lips lightly, savoring him tenderly.

Covering Hal's lips with her own, Luna sucked with audible smooching.

Finally, she even inserted her tongue to entangle Hal's, thoroughly enjoying the taste of a passionate kiss.

During this time, Hal could neither resist nor think, simply frozen on the spot.

This kiss persisted for roughly two or three minutes. Luna Francois slowly relaxed her lips and looked at Hal's face with rapture and desire.

"It is a request from my beloved Harry after all. I shall be an obedient girl this time."

"Th—Thanks."

"However, don't forget to reward me next time you need a favor, okay? Otherwise, I might shoot you in the back, Harry. With a large-caliber rifle meant for hunting elephants!"

Ten minutes after parting ways from Luna Francois at the lounge...

The pounding in Hal's heart still had not subsided while he walked to the hotel lobby with unsteady footsteps. This was already his second time sharing a kiss with Luna Francois. Every time was such an intense shock— Just as he was walking in a daze, someone suddenly spoke to him.

"Haruomi, how did it go on handling Luna's side of things?"

"Huh!?"

He jumped in fright, only to see that the speaker was Asya.

"You just went to see her to ask her to stay back, right? What's the result?"

"I-It went very well, yes! After I told her the reason, she definitely understood!"

"Really? Looks like it was right to have you tell her directly, Haruomi."

Had Asya been present, negotiations might have broken down.

Hal had gone to meet Luna alone precisely because he was worried about that.

However, the scheming American girl could also kidnap Hal and take him out to the streets at night. Asya was probably waiting in the lobby for him to prevent that possibility.

After hearing about the outcome, Asya nodded with apparent satisfaction.

"Although I felt uneasy letting you go alone, Haruomi, dear me, with so many eyes in the hotel after all, even someone as audacious as Luna would have no choice but to behave!"

"Roight. Yeah, no problemo, totally no problemo!"

"? Haruomi, why are suddenly speaking in a funny way?"

"N-No, I didn't. Let's go home sooner to make preparations before the trip."

They had informed Orihime and Hazumi beforehand and the two girls had agreed to go to America together.

Although there was the uncertain factor of Princess Yukikaze using Old Tokyo as her base, the prey that might be found in Old Manhattan was too attractive.

After the Solomon Islands, another departure from Japan to overseas—

Hal and Asya exchanged nods and walked to the hotel's entrance together.

Chapter 2 - Road of Salem

Part 1

Going to the American East Coast required a long-haul flight over twelve hours long.

The time of arrival was around 9am on the morning of August 5. Hal looked up at the North American sky that he had not seen for quite some time. It was so blue that it compelled the viewer to relax in leisure.

Were this the West Coast, perhaps he would be able to use the description of "sunny and refreshing."

However, as soon as he stepped out of the airport into the outdoors, he was instantly greeted by the humid and stuffy atmosphere. Unlike the West Coast's dry climate, the East Coast was quite wet.

Hal and his group had landed at Logan Airport in *Boston*.

Immediately, they suffered from a hot and stuffy environment similar to Japan's.

"Hazumi!? You are looking very pale. Are you alright!?"

"Y-Yes, I feel very uncomfortable, but if I rest somewhere cool and shaded, I probably..."

Orihime hurried over to look after Hazumi who had suddenly crouched down.

One could hardly blame her. After being locked in an airplane for more than half a day then encountering this sort of summer heat immediately after disembarking. Not only that, but there was also a thirteen-hour time difference between Boston and Tokyo New Town.

"This humidity and heat, combined with the mental strain caused by jet lag..."

"Even for me and Haruomi, this is tough..."

Hal grumbled and Asya murmured irritably too.

This was an air journey from the islands of Japan to the United States.

Compared to flying west to places such as Europe or the Middle East, eastbound flights produced more severe symptoms of jet lag, since it involved moving opposite to the Earth's rotation, after all.

If even Hal and Asya, who were used to traveling, were suffering, it went without saying for Hazumi with her weaker constitution.

As a side note, the junior witch, who was susceptible to feeling unwell from overexposure to both direct sunlight and air-conditioning, was dressed in a summer dress with floral markings with a cardigan on top as well as sunglasses and a straw hat.

"That being said, Orihime-san seems to be doing well..."

"Me? I guess it's because I slept well on the plane?"

With Asya staring at her, Orihime answered matter-of-factly.

Dressed in a tank top and an open-shoulder cutsew paired with a white miniskirt, she was the only one lively and energetic, despite claiming beforehand that her overseas traveling experience only consisted of Hawaii, Tahiti and Korea. Hal felt drained yet impressed.

"It's probably due to a fundamental difference in physical endurance too..."

In terms of vitality in a broad sense, Asya should be unparalleled.

But in the case of pure physical endurance, there was probably no one who could surpass the athletic girl whose past feats included national kendo champion... However, it was at this moment that Hal realized.

He was supposed to hold a clear advantage in the form of the suspicious power of dragonbane.

In spite of that, he was still suffering from jet lag. This was most likely proof that he was "still human." If there ever came a day when not only time zones but even the presence of air no longer mattered to him— Ending this unpleasant thought, Hal spoke up.

"I'm going to rent a car. You girls take care of Shirasaka."

Leaving on his own, he walked towards a bus parked in front of the airport.

The bus was imprinted with a rental company's logo. Since the actual parking lot of the rental cars was some distance away, one had to go there via the free shuttle service.

Hal and ten-odd other travelers boarded the bus.

Thirty minutes after making his way to the rental company he had booked ahead of time, Hal drove a Japanese-made light sedan back to the airport to meet up with his friends.

After occupying the front passenger seat, Asya said, "A corrected routine will help eliminate the fatigue from jet lag! Anyway, Haruomi, let's go for breakfast first!"

"Come on, weren't you eating donuts at the airport just now?"

That being said, it would be a good idea to take a break before embarking on a long-distance drive.

Hal drove the car and stopped in front of a nearby burger shop. Since Boston was a city he had visited a number of times before, he knew his way around somewhat.

"Isn't Manhattan our destination? That would be in New York, right?"

They were at a hamburger chain quite famous domestically in America.

After finding seats inside the shop, Orihime asked in puzzlement.

"But isn't Boston in the state of Massachusetts?"

"Yes. The institute of technology bearing the state's name is also very famous. This is the state's capital."

"It sort of counts as being to the right of New York State, right? But the two states are really big, so Boston and Old Manhattan have no connection at all."

After listening to Hal and Asya's explanations, Orihime tilted her head.

"In that case, why did we come to Boston?"

"I wanted to make a detour—to visit Salem."

"Salem huh...?"

Hearing the name of the place Hal had spoken quietly, Hazumi reacted.

Although she had collapsed for a while, it looked like her condition improved with the help of cold orange juice and air-conditioning indoors and within the car. Timidly, she said, "I've heard of it before. I remember it was during a periodic training session on witch knowledge."

"I figured. This city of Salem was the stage for witch hunts during the seventeenth century, you know?"

" "Witch hunts!?" "

"I decided after discussing with Asya. It would be good experience if you two could visit that place once, Juujouji and Shirasaka."

"We have a tea party scheduled with the 'Grandmas' this afternoon."

Hearing the unsettling subject of witch hunts, the two Japanese witches were rendered speechless.

A meeting with their "seniors" had been arranged for Orihime and Hazumi without giving them advance notice or time for mental preparation. Hal and Asya had intentionally not told them.

"It's not like they'll eat you alive. Relax."

Saying that, Asya immediately reached for the paper box before her.

What she picked up was a king-size bacon burger. After ripping open the aluminum foil for keeping it warm, she took a great bite. The 100% beef patties were stacked in three layers and topped with thick grilled bacon. It looked plenty impressive.

As a side note, this burger chain's selling point was that it did not use any frozen meat whatsoever.

In addition, there was a king-size cheeseburger and fries (extra large) in front of Asya.

"S-Such impressive quantities."

Hazumi's eyes were round while she stared at the outrageous amount of fries.

Carrying a small mountain of french fries, the container should be called a

"paper bucket." The amount was so great that it would be more than enough to feed a Japanese family of four.

"This is a chain whose expansion is centered around the East Coast. In addition to abundant quantities, they also offer great flavor."

"Well, I can't believe you're free to choose this kind of size at a shop that doesn't cater to big eaters in particular. Land of the free indeed."

"So this amount isn't a meal combo meant for a whole family to share?" Orihime asked the emphatically muttering Hal in a whisper while Asya was heartily enjoying the fulfilling nature of American portion sizes.

"No no no, their main target demographic should be active guys in high school and college. I happened to see someone order this meal earlier, but gave up on finishing it in the end. Powerful contenders capable of finishing it only show up once in a while, apparently... like Asya."

Apart from Asya, the remaining three had ordered a regular-size fries to share, paired with cold drinks to soothe their parched throats, thus enjoying a short break.

After spending forty minutes in the burger shop's cool environment, Hal's group got in their car and drove to Salem.

The drive from Boston took less than an hour.

With only a population of forty thousand, Salem was a quiet port city. Brick buildings could be seen everywhere. Overall, the streets seemed quite old. Compared to Boston with its abundant skyscrapers, the contrast was striking.

"There are quite a lot of cute buildings with nice atmospheres."

"It feels a bit like a drama set."

"This area consists of relatively old buildings or houses. They were mostly built during the seventeenth century."

While Orihime and Hazumi were looking out the car window happily, Hal nodded and explained.

"I don't know if he used the scenery here for inspiration, but during the 1920s, a guy called Lovecraft wrote a horror novel featuring a city very similar

to Salem. For fans of that genre, this place is like a pilgrimage site."

"Haruomi and I used to play 'The window! The window!' and 'Sneaking into Innsmouth' at an old mansion in this city. We had so much fun."

"? Was there something at the window?"

"Although I have no idea how it was played, I can imagine it being mischief without a fear of God..."

Next to the puzzled Hazumi, Orihime smiled wryly in exasperation.

But she immediately changed the subject.

"By the way, Haruga-kun, you mentioned witch hunts earlier..."

"Simply put, they happened back when America was still a British colony. At the time, girls living in Salem would play a game imitating a seance."

"I presume it was something quite similar to divination games in Japan like Kokkuri-san or Angel-san," Asya added from the front passenger seat.

"Girls in puberty trying out occult games with a playful mindset."

"However, preachers and officials raised an uproar when they found out and arrested all the girls, locking them in prison to carry out witch trials, finally executing them."

" "....." "

"From there, things unfolded like medieval witch hunts. Only five or six people were arrested in the beginning but suspicions of women being witches kept spreading throughout the city. In the end, the number of people arrested reached as high as three digits. Only after dozens of people had lost their lives did the government finally step in to bring the whole incident under control."

Facing the speechless Orihime and Hazumi, Asya shrugged and said, "This incident stands as an important historical lesson about the cruelties of mass hysteria, passed down to the current day. However, I believe that the current Salem is just a simple and friendly town."

With casual conversation going on during the drive, they soon reached the destination.

It was a house located in the countryside of Salem. Within the premises enclosed by a perimeter of high walls was a beautiful, carefully maintained garden. After going through the gate, they had to proceed—another twenty minutes. Of course, it was by car.

At the entrance to the house was an oval plaza resembling a bus terminal.

Hal parked the car on the side. There were several vehicles apart from theirs, including luxury German cars, old American cars and even a half truck.

Thanks to that, Hal's Japanese car was not particularly conspicuous.

Also, the solemn and majestic mansion in front of them was built in a oblong shape with three floors.

This was the "country house" style that English nobles liked to use for their rural palatial residences. The "old mansion" setting used in novels and movies mostly followed this type too.

"Umm... Senpai." Perhaps due to her piqued curiosity, Hazumi asked from the back seat.

"What kind of place is this? A museum... of sorts?"

"No, it's just a personal residence. A certain old lady's estate."

"Really? It took a long time getting here from the main gate, you know?"

Adjacent to Hazumi, Orihime was also staring wide-eyed. As a side note, this garden was four times as big as the Tokyo Dome in area.

Asya shrugged and said, "Rich people in America often build houses on unnecessarily big plots of land. Not only swimming pools, but they even put golf courses into their gardens too. Well, this place is actually pretty low-key for a wealthy family in that range."

"If I remember correctly, Miss Erick's family made their fortune through the futures market, right?"

"Yes. She secretly used her powers as a witch to predict wheat and soy production the following year, thereby profiting in the process."

"A witch?"

Orihime asked Asya and Hal about the word that had appeared in the conversation.

"Yeah. Rather than the magi known as witches nowadays, a real witch."

"Today, we are going to meet the matriarch of this household and her friends, a couple of old ladies. They are all witches—they use traditional spells and concoct potions, etc... In other words, they are a group of old ladies who use magic."

"They were the benefactors back when SAURU first started as a research organization, providing magical knowledge as the brains and funding operations as sponsors."

"All of us, members of SAURU, call them the 'Grandmas.'"

Part 2

It was the second day of the America expedition.

Yesterday, Hal and his friends had left the grand mansion in the Salem countryside around evening time then drove to their hotel in Boston City, thus giving themselves a good rest after the lengthy traveling.

Deciding it would be a good idea to go sightseeing in leisure the next day, the group made their way to the seaside early in the day.

Boston was the state capital of Massachusetts, a port city with a long history dating back to the British colonial era.

Hal and friends embarked on a staple of sightseeing in this ancient city, a whale watching cruise. It was a gigantic tourist ship with a capacity of over two hundred passengers.

"But yesterday, I was honestly surprised."

Drinking iced coffee from a paper cup, Orihime grumbled.

She had just bought it from a vendor on the ship. The group had out to the deck. Although there was no air-conditioning, the sea breeze's refreshing coolness served as a substitute. The sight of splashing waves was dazzling.

"Although they were a group of friendly old ladies, the atmosphere there was too unique... Don't tell me you took us there without telling us because you wanted to surprise us?"

"Hahahahaha, don't be upset."

"We believed that things would go well even without explaining beforehand, given your communication skills, Orihime-san and Hazumi-san. As expected of you two, you were able to play along with us flawlessly."

Seeing Hal dismiss his friends' misgivings with a laugh, Asya provided additional explanation.

Hal thought back to the "tea party" the day before.

Led by a middle-aged butler, the group arrived at the tearoom in the house.

There were seven or eight old ladies chatting happily away while savoring black tea or coffee in leisure. The refreshments on the table included muffins, scones, kidney pie, raspberry pie, *etc.* As a side note, all of them were hand made.

"Dear Grandmas, allow me to introduce these two *magi* from Tokyo New Town."

Asya extended her hand towards Orihime and Hazumi to introduce them first.

"Oh my, is that so?" "Visitors from such a faraway land." "Wow, you are still so young." "Would you like some delicious snacks? Please help yourselves."

Smiling cordially, they greeted the guests from Tokyo and even called the youngest, Hazumi, over to their side and handed muffins and scones to her one after another.

Meanwhile, Hal the interpreter was completely ignored.

As a dragonslaying rune holder, Haruga Haruomi's fame had risen like a helicopter within SAURU.

However, the Grandmas were completely uninterested in news of that sort. Without showing any surprise or reaction at the sight of Hal, they probably pegged him as merely "the one looking after the girls from Tokyo."

The Grandmas enjoyed their tea and conversed as they pleased.

Soon, they started sharing their "insight as witches" with the girls from Tokyo New Town.

"We witches" "must conceal our true identities." "As *serpent* users, you must take particular care." "Enough people have suffered at the hands of trumped up charges." "Yes, the populace can sometimes turn into demons even more terrifying than dragons."

In a laid back tone paired with the style of gentle old ladies, they murmured about the distrust of mankind.

Hal and Asya translated every sentence while Orihime and Hazumi listened quietly with slightly troubled smiles.

Regarding the fearsome ferocity of dragonkind, what the Grandmas had to say was—

"Although the serpents and the little magi girls are working very hard—" "they are still no match" "against the dragons." "We witches of old" "are able to read the flow of the future." "Darkness lies ahead."

Despite a tone that was not somber, they spoke after one another to predict a bleak future.

The conversation kept continuing with such topics to accompany the tea. Orihime and Hazumi maintained their lovely smiles while concurring repeatedly as many as a hundred times.

In the end, the tea party dragged on from noon all the way until 4pm.

It was all because the Grandmas talked nonstop.

As a side note, while Hal was calmly focused on interpreting, Asya spent the whole time quietly munching on pie and muffins except when helping Hal out every now and then...

"If the girls contracted with leviathans are magi, then those old ladies would be sorceresses."

The whale watching cruise sailed smoothly.

After Asya spoke on the deck, enjoying the sea breeze, Hal added an explanation.

"If you trace back the foundation SAURU's magical knowledge back to the source, most of it was provided by the Grandmas. Due to this, their word is quite influential."

"Although only about twenty of them are still alive, the Grandmas live quietly, gathered together in places like Salem and Budapest. It is also their wish that information about witches and leviathans be kept out of public knowledge."

As a side note, for unknown reasons, the Grandmas chose to live secluded in

cities with a history of witch persecution.

It was probably meant as a lesson to junior witches to never forget the mistakes of the past, but—

Asya sighed lightly.

"Those with special powers should keep the truth hidden. This is to prevent the tragedies and persecutions of the past from repeating... Sigh, I understand there are advantages to doing things this way, but it's too conservative. There are many aspects that make it unsuitable for the twenty-first century..."

"Partly because of the presence of dragonkind, definitely, but it's also because they're not part of the gaming generation."

Seeing Hal remark poignantly, Orihime asked, "Is there a relationship between gaming and witches?"

"Well, I believe that the popularization of home consoles and the resulting spread of RPG knowledge has made the concept of 'magic' permeate greatly through ordinary society."

"In recent years, the term MP has entered common usage in many countries."

"When explaining the usage restriction on pseudo-divinity, people get it straight away when you say 'out of magic points.'"

"Nowadays, even if a young thirteen-year-old witch were to start a home delivery service, people will only watch over her with gentle eyes."

Hal and Asya explained in alternation to the baffled Orihime. Hearing this, the well-bred Japanese young lady could not help but smile wryly. Then she suddenly asked, "Speaking of which, where did Hazumi run off to?"

At that moment, Hal noticed it too. There were no signs of Hazumi on the deck.

The youngest of the group, the middle school student, not only had a reliable personality but was also resourceful. However, this was still her first time traveling abroad, no matter what. Worried, Hal, Asya and Orihime looked inside the ship.

Then they immediately found Hazumi.

Since this was a large ship, the interior was very spacious, even enough to hold a basketball match.

There were sofas placed next to the windows on the left and right so that tourists could enjoy the sea view in leisure. Hazumi was standing before one of these sofas.

However, a haughty prepubescent girl, dressed in a scarlet kimono, was sitting in the sofa.

Hinokagutsuchi indeed. She had apparently materialized without them noticing. Facing the proud former dragon queen, Hazumi handed over a paper cup filled with some kind of beverage.

"...I-I bought you the orange juice you wanted!"

"Mm-hmm, thank you. As a reward, I permit you to sit next to me."

"Y-Yes. Uh... Umm, excuse me."

Hazumi sat down on the sofa rather apprehensively.

Since a young girl in a kimono was too conspicuous a sight, the surrounding passengers' gazes gathered upon them. However, Hinokagutsuchi sipped her juice through a straw, completely unfazed by those gazes. She must have ordered Hazumi to buy it for her as an errand.

Hal and company walked over to the girl and the ghost in their party.

"You sure know how to enjoy yourself..."

"Nonsense. I am simply taking a break. Besides, ultimately—"

Hinokagutsuchi replied instantly to Hal's opening line with a tone of derision.

"This is a journey specifically by ship to watch whales, isn't it? Be that as it may, aren't the little serpents summoned frequently by you even more exotic creatures?"

"Summoning magically crafted creatures and observing wildlife have completely different meanings."

"Is that so? True, ancient humans would regard gigantic beasts as 'substitutes for gods' and decide on their own to establish worship."

"That's right. Besides, speaking of whales, they were considered 'sea gods' in standing by Japanese people in the past."

Hal nodded in agreement with what Hinokagutsuchi said.

Ever since antiquity, humans had treated animals as divine messengers or even worshiped them as deities themselves.

In the present day, the precepts of Hinduism still promote cattle as sacred beasts and extend preferential treatment to them. Totem worship where wild animals were worshiped as tribal ancestors or guardian deities existed all over the world. Even in Japan, there were shrines that regarded animals—birds, monkeys, boards, wolves, snakes, etc—as divine messengers.

In Japan, the whale was not only a hunted prey but also a sacred beast at the same time.

"Speaking of which, this has bothered me for a while now."

Asya interjected.

"The True Genbu that showed up at Tokyo New Town a little while ago... I remember it being mentioned as a composite creature similar to leviathans, right? In other words, are our 'serpents' able to acquire 'goddess power' like True Genbu?"

"It is not impossible—Or rather, I should say it is 'theoretically possible.'"

Hinokagutsuchi kept the straw in her mouth while answering.

After moistening her throat with the juice, she tossed the empty cup to one side. Hazumi hastily reached out to catch it.

"Having become a great expert on the path of unorthodoxy, Solomon took the creatures originally regarded as 'substitutes for gods,' processed them using synthesis magic, enlarged their bodies, and modified their savage nature, thus making them reborn as 'imitation dragons.' Hence, that was how your serpents arose."

With the obedient Hazumi waiting on her like a maidservant, Hinokagutsuchi seemed to be in a good mood.

Hal did not know if that was the reason, but she was now talking freely about

topics she used to refrain from giving details.

"Consequently, what you lot need to do is reawaken the sacred visage that dwells in the depths of serpent souls to begin with—"

"Specifically, how do we do that?"

Hinokagutsuchi scoffed "hmph" at Asya's question.

"Do not bother asking clever little questions of that sort. There is no such technique."

"No such technique!?"

"I have mentioned this before. Despite being fakes, they are ultimately connected to the lineage of the gods. Trying to exert wanton control over them would be an act of disrespect. The likes of you ought to respect human bounds and go no further than to offer sincere prayers. Should your prayer reach the goddess within the serpent, naturally, she would grant you an act of charity or two."

"..."

"Well, out of you lot, the one who is capable of accomplishing this—"

Having said that, Hinokagutsuchi suddenly vanished.

An instant before disappearing, she had glanced at the girl beside her. This was probably not coincidence. After all, Hazumi always listened to Hinokagutsuchi's every word attentively with a serious expression.

—At that moment, an announcement was broadcast in English.

"Oh, I think it's saying that whales can be seen port side."

"Really!?"

Hazumi's eyes glowed after she heard Hal's report. The sofa they were at right now happened to be port side. The group all focused their attention and looked out the window.

Stretching endlessly outside the sightseeing ship was the view of Massachusetts Bay's blue waves.

Soon after, Hal and the girls witnessed a gigantic black body surrounded by

flowing seawater. It was probably fourteen or fifteen meters high, reaching the same standards as leviathans.

"Hazumi! Go outside and look through a telescope!"

"Yes, Nee-sama!"

Orihime suggested in excitement and her younger cousin replied immediately.

Part 3

Returning to port after the whale watching tour, it happened to be noon.

Hal silently gestured with his eyes and the group set off with Asya in the lead. Their destination was a restaurant specializing in seafood cuisine. After having lunch there with lobster as the main course, they continued their sightseeing in the afternoon.

As a side note, Hal and Asya had a little discussion after the meal.

"Since we're in Boston already, how about another visit to Salem? A pilgrimage tour to relive the Prohibition Era of Lovecraft's time and step foot upon the various lands of the Great Old Ones."

"Denied. Given that we're in Boston..."

Asya decisively rejected Hal's suggestion.

"How about visiting the museum of John Manjiro, the great explorer who was born in Japan during the Bakumatsu era when the nation was still closed off? It's only a short drive away."

"Ahem. Excuse me, you two, please arrange an itinerary that's more considerate towards people who are visiting America for the first time♪"

Finally, to fulfill Orihime's request, the group started urban sightseeing within Boston.

—As a side note, John Manjiro, also known as Nakahama Manjiro, was shipwrecked in the Pacific Ocean when he was fourteen years old.

It was during the Bakumatsu era when Japan pursued an isolationist policy. John had to survive as a cast away for as long as a month.

However, he was miraculously rescued by an American whaleboat, thus bringing him to America. Thereafter, he became a first-rate navigator and explorer before returning to his home country of Japan in the end. Although Asya felt deeply empathetic to his plight, at this moment, she had completely

forgotten him and was enjoying the urban sightseeing.

From the waterfront by the sea to the prosperous downtown.

Following such a route, they could experience the street scenery woven together from modern skyscrapers and brick buildings whose style dated back to the earlier half of the nineteenth century. This commercial district was a must-see attraction for tourists to Boston.

While Orihime and Hazumi were strolling leisurely, a general store caught their eye.

Fashionable and adorable trinkets were displayed on the tasteful shelves. The two Japanese witches looked at these goods together while chatting with smiles on their faces.

"...We definitely wouldn't come across this kind of store if it was just the two of us."

"...On the other hand, we do frequently visit dusty shops that carry unearthed objects that appear to be related to our work."

Withdrawing to a corner inside the store, Asya and Hal conversed in whispers.

"Time for the social studies tour to end. Old Manhattan is up next."

"Sneaking into the lair of dragonkind's great king in search of treasure so as to find a way to oppose the dragon princess—Isn't this kind of putting the cart before the horse?"

"Let's pray that the great king won't jump out himself and say 'A monster has appeared!'..."

The two of them were planning to infiltrate the Old Manhattan Concession, the territory of Red Hannibal.

Even so, Asya was still quite relaxed in mood.

After all, Luna was not around. Without that vixen trying to bewitch Hal using underhanded means, she was able to calmly take on the challenge to build a new relationship with her childhood friend.

First of all, she had to obtain at least one accomplishment during this America

expedition.

For example... Yes. Before the conclusion of the trip, she must make Hal say this:

'Although I failed to notice until now, Asya, you're really... very pretty.'
Something like that.

For this purpose, it might be a good idea for her to put on her victory outfit and dress up properly.

Right now, she was still dressed in a short-sleeve blouse paired with a miniskirt, but had removed the flight jacket she was always wearing. Simulating a fashion show in her mind, Asya began to review her options.

Plan 1: How about a frilly one-piece dress to emphasize her cuteness and femininity? Then pair that with a black officer coat (styled like the German panzer division during Second World War).

Plan 2: A refreshing white blouse with a pair of green shorts. Then add a military hat that symbolized the Green Berets (obviously, the beret) and special forces epaulets.

Plan 3: Straight balls should be used for decisive showdowns. Using that amazing masterpiece of a military rifle, the AK-47—

"Huh? Wait, something feels weird..."

Asya suddenly tilted her head.

Even though she was clearly pondering fashion considerations to demonstrate cuteness, beauty and femininity, why did she keep thinking of accessories associated with violence?

"...I-It must be because of Mom's influence. The fault lies in my childhood immersion environment!"

She accidentally spoke out the answer to her own question.

Perhaps startled, Hal asked, "What's wrong, Asya?"

"Oh nothing. I just realized that my tastes in fashion have been influenced a lot by Mom... Whether now or in the past, she's always incorporated military

issued items into her outfit, like coats, jackets, boots or watches."

"Now that you mention it, I think that really is true."

"And she totally isn't aware of it herself. She simply chooses them because they're handy and available. That's why, since I've been dressing in hand-me-downs since childhood as her daughter, the result is—"

"She passed on that habit to you?"

"Exactly. Sheesh... I can't believe that someone so careless could have a fan club. There are so many inexplicable things in this world."

"After all, Auntie is—well, not only pretty but sexy too."

"S-Sexy!?"

"Yeah. Her disposition is the type to instantly captivate the hearts of men. Despite her coolness and not primping herself at all, she's got a kind of womanly charm that's hard to describe, it's very sexy."

Hal spoke with his gaze cast out into the distance. Inexplicably, he seemed a bit happy.

"Don't tell me you're thinking about Mom right now?"

"Well—hahaha."

Hal tried to cover up with laughter. Asya concluded her guess was correct.

Gah—Asya felt frustrated to an unprecedented degree. Their facial appearances could be considered identical but in spite of that, her mother was always the one popular with men!

Whatever. The task at hand was to develop further relations with her childhood friend.

Asya pretended to cough. Just as she was about to speak to Hal—

"Excuse me, Senpai! Could you help translate a bit?"

"Sure. I'll be right there."

Answering the sudden request, Hal walked over towards the source of the voice.

Naturally, the one who called him was Hazumi. Asya took a closer look, only to see Hazumi with Orihime, staring at a palm-sized music box. The salesman, a black man standing next to them, was speaking rapidly in English.

"What is he saying?"

"It's too fast for me to catch, so I had no choice but to give up."

Hazumi was tilting her head. Next to her, Orihime shrugged too.

If it were a conversation on the level of buying drinks from a vendor, there would be no need to bother too much with grammar. Simply stringing a few suitable words together would be enough to express one's meaning.

However, that approach did not work with an English speaker whose rapid words were delivered with a Puerto Rican accent.

Hal explained briefly to the two Japanese girls.

"What he's saying is the usual 'I'll give you a discount if you buy it, okay?' that's common in tourist shops. Right now, it's 10% off. Do you want to try haggling, Shirasaka? You can probably bring it even lower."

"Eh? Y-You want me to do it!?"

"Relax. If it's just haggling over the price, you'll definitely find a way."

Hal took out his phone and started up a calculator app.

Next, he entered the price of the music box Hazumi had selected—and discounted it by 20%. After seeing that, the face of the excellent learner who was both his assistant and his junior in school instantly lit up.

Hazumi immediately took out her cellphone.

She opened up the calculator, typed in 50% of the listed price then showed the salesman. The man shook his head and changed the value to 20% off. Unfazed, Hazumi changed it to 40% off— Seeing Hazumi working as hard as she could, Hal retreated to the back.

Orihime smiled and stood by Hazumi's side. This price battle became a solo showdown between Hazumi and the salesman.

(Haruga-kun, you taught Hazumi something unusual again.)

(Not at all, this kind of economic warfare happens frequently all over the world. Well, I have to say that the people who made Arabic numerals spread across the entire world were truly great.) Hearing Orihime's whispers, Hal answered quietly in return.

Since they were talking very quietly and whispering in each other's ear, their distance was extremely intimate, almost touching face to face. Asya panicked as a result.



This was almost like seeing a loving couple together!

Besides, Hal and Orihime seemed to realize this too. Suddenly flustered, the

two of them sneaked a glance at each other's face frantically and shyly.

One could feel a bittersweetness just by observing from the side, it felt extremely embarrassing—

Asya was shocked.

"I-Is this the romantic comedy state of 'more than friends but less than lovers' that people talk about? Hazumi also seems quite close to Haruomi and he dotes on her a lot...!"

Trapped in her mouth, her mutterings were unintelligible.

Could it be that at this rate, even in Luna's absence, the relationships on this side were going to progress too...?

I have to hurry and do something—Asya vowed in her heart.

"Like I said, is there any solution!?"

'There is not much help I can provide when you call me out of the blue to discuss this sort of matter. It's not like I am Dora●mon.'

That night, Asya made a international long-distance call to President M.

However, although her figure featured elements from a certain country's cat robot, the club president with a body weight of 140kg by visual estimates replied mercilessly, 'The time of "Game Over" draws near.'

"No way!?"

Incidentally, Asya was currently in a single room at a certain hotel in Boston City.

She had spent the previous night in the same room, but the plan was to check out early tomorrow morning. It was time to travel to the part of New York City at the peninsula of Long Island in preparation for infiltrating Old Manhattan.

'Didn't I tell you last time? There is no hope unless you press the reset button. Your score has been the repeated accumulation of zero the whole time.'

"That's why I called you for advice, hoping that one of your magic-like skills could instantly help—"

'Totally impossible, useless girl.'

"Sob sob sob."

'Besides, isn't magic your specialty? Don't you guys wield kinds of extremely suspicious powers?'

'I-I don't want to be called suspicious by someone who has a mysterious superpower.'

'There there. Why don't you simply concoct a witch's love potion and have Haruga drink it?'

"Love potion... Of course there isn't such a convenient spell. If anything, out of all the techniques I know of, what would be effective—"

Asya began to space out with several ideas spinning in her mind.

Objectively speaking, she and her mother were quite similar in terms of basic elements. Equals in face. Their military mindset and spartan behavior patterns made them akin to sister models.

Yet in spite of that, her mother was the only one who was popular with men.

In other words, all she needed to do was add what her mother had but she did not—!

'It appears that you have grasped some kind of key point...'

"Yes. From this point on, I will fight with everything I've got or die trying!"

After hanging up, Asya walked over to the bathroom sink.

The key was self-hypnosis and changing herself physically, mentally and spiritually. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, she released magical power—

Part 4

'Tokyo is currently very peaceful, Harry.'

"That's good to know."

'So peaceful that those hectic days prior to summer seem like a lie now.'

With his laptop open in his hotel room, Hal was conversing over video chat.

The other person was Luna Francois who had stayed back to defend Tokyo New Town. With him and the witches away from home recently, it was fortunate that nothing problematic had happened in the mean time.

"I won't have any complaints even if Princess Yukikaze decides to live a secluded life in Old Tokyo from now on."

However, this possibility definitely did not exist. Hal shrugged.

The white dragon king whose personality was as straight as an arrow— Princess Yukikaze.

One might presume her to be like a male lion currently lazing around. However, if she were to suddenly get up one day, one would expect her to resume her interrupted conquest and run over to seek out Haruga Haruomi for some fun.

"It's very possible she might attack us and Tokyo out of the blue."

'And the power accumulated during this time would serve to make the attack even more intense when the time comes.'

"Although we're just guessing randomly at the moment, it'd be a problem if that actually came true... By the way, Luna, what's with your outfit?"

'Why are you asking for such an obvious answer? Of course I'm wearing it to show you, Harry♪'

Shown on the LCD screen was Luna Francois' smile.

Soon after starting the call with Hal, she deliberately changed clothing in front of him.

What she had on now was a one-piece dress with red patterns on a white background.

The extremely form-fitting sleeveless design featured a miniskirt with an oval opening in front of the chest, providing a sexy view of her cleavage.

Furthermore, there was a company logo printed in blue letters on the fabric...

Hal recalled the American beer that was quite well-known in Japan too. That particular brand was widely known for the skimpy uniforms worn by women models to promote their beer.

'You are a boy, after all, Harry. Compared to Japanese brewers, you probably prefer American Budweiser, don't you?'

"I-I don't really know much about beers. I'm a minor, you know!?"

'Yet you stare so intently despite your words. Fufu, how delightful. I went out of my way to prepare this Bu● Girl uniform just for you!'

Luna Francois deliberately approached the camera and made a forward leaning posture.

The closeup of her cleavage gave Hal quite an intense jolt.

Although Haruga Haruomi regularly called himself a closet pervert, Luna's spirit of altruism almost made him want to withdraw the "closet" part of the title. That was how audacious and attractive she was.

'Oh right. Actually, I received notice from the New York National Guard today.'

"The National Guard?"

'Indeed. The WotC's chief wants to have a chat with you.'

"...What's that? I've never heard the term before."

'The official name is the 'Witches of the Coast.' Founded a year ago, it's an air squadron of witches belonging to various East Coast states with New York first and foremost.'

"Oh—I can't believe they established an organization like that."

'If you are free, it might be a good idea to pay their office a visit and hang out. Well, I originally intended to bring this matter up after you accomplish your first goal.'

Previously, Hal had promised Luna to contact her regularly every night (although due to the time difference, it would be morning for Luna). On this night, the video chat ended here.

They were going to set off for New York the next day. Finally, Hal's group was making their way to this expedition's main objective.

The next morning...

Hal met up with Orihime and Hazumi in the hotel lobby before heading to the breakfast buffet.

"Umm, what happened to Asya-san?"

"Seems like she overslept. That's so rare."

"Or it could be the opposite. Perhaps she woke up too early and went for breakfast first?"

Since Asya did not show up for a long time, the trio went to the restaurant on their own first.

After selecting fresh vegetable salad, ham, bacon, omelets, scrambled egg, toast and croissants on their own, they found a place to sit down.

Asya finally arrived late, five minutes after they had started eating.

"Sorry, I overslept a little."

Smiling tenderly, Hal's childhood friend sat down next to him. Hal went "hmm?" and tilted his head—Something was strange. He stared intently at Asya and immediately noticed what it was.

"...So, you're having breakfast for the second time today, aren't you?"

"No, I haven't eaten anything yet today. What's the matter?"

"Well, because there's not much on your plate."

The breakfast Asya had placed on her tray and brought to the table was...

A plate of egg sandwiches. One yogurt. A cup of cafe au lait. That was all. Normally, she would be able to finish four times as much and even head out calmly for a second round.

"What happened to you, Asya-san!?"

"A-Are you feeling unwell!? I brought stomach medication!"

Not only was Hal surprised, but even Orihime and Hazumi were worried too.

However, Asya simply gave a light smile and denied.

"Nothing's wrong, okay? I woke up this morning in perfect health, so Hazumi-san, thank you for your kind offer but I won't be needing it."

What the heck was up with Asya?

But Hal had no choice but to shelve this question for now.

Opposite to their table, a Caucasian man in a suit was reading the New York Times opened up in front of him. As a result, Hal naturally saw the contents on the back of the newspaper.

"...What is going on?"

The headline on that page drew in Hal's attention. Written on it was:

'THE RED-DRAGON HANNIBAL RUNS FOR GOVERNOR OF NEW YORK!'

Red Hannibal had become a candidate running for Governor of New York—

The most famous and powerful dragon on earth. Called "Red Hannibal"—he was the Caesar Draconis ruling the Old Manhattan Concession.

Indeed. Like Princess Yukikaze, he was a monster, a lofty dragon king.

An ominous premonition surfaced in Hal's mind. He immediately took out his cellphone to search the internet.

The news story running in the web version of the New York Times greatly shocked Hal and his friends.

Chapter 3 - New York, New York

Part 1

Dragons had flown in from the moon's surface and satellite orbits to ravage the world.

Air defense systems capable of swiftly detecting them were basically humanity's life line and more important than witches and leviathans, in fact. Consequently, the sky was filled with spy satellites, radar networks, and reconnaissance jets from various countries at every altitude.

Detected aerial threats were shared globally through an information network. An attack warning would be immediately issued locally while forces were dispatched to intercept.

"It's such a great help that Raptors fly so slowly. They apparently need time to get used to the Earth's atmosphere," explained Christine Hulk to her protege in front of her.

Cheerful in tone. Native to New York State, she was eighteen years old this year. A witch. Although she talked like a boy, she was undoubtedly a girl.

Her long blonde hair was tied in a refreshing ponytail.

The captain of the cheerleading team in a high school, she also had an excellent figure.

As a side note, her protege was sitting in the pilot seat of a flight simulator while Christine stood behind her.

"They fly sluggishly like migratory birds for about an hour or two, then their attack impulse erupts all at once and they make a move on the nearest city."

"...Only cities?"

The junior witch—Marie Thesz—raised a question.

Eleven years old, hailing from Wisconsin, she was still studying in elementary school. Marie was a novice witch who had just formed a covenant with her partner a month earlier.

Compared to the talkative Christine, she said few words without much facial expression.

"Although it's not exclusive to cities, the tendency to target areas with high population and building density is quite high."

"Hmm—"

"While the Raptors are flying in leisure, they can be taken care of in the majority of cases as long as nearby military airbases can dispatch emergency squadrons to intercept them. Although this base is only equipped with older F-16s, they're more than enough to shoot down Raptors."

"...So this is an old model after all."

In the modern era where LCD touch panels were ubiquitous, the old-style control panel in front of her was composed of thirty-something instruments with "numbers, needles and dials."

This flight simulator reproduced the cockpit of the F-16, an older manned fighter jet.

"Don't worry. Even though it's an old model, it's still in service all over the world. In terms of production, the manufacturing cost of an old model that's like an antique is far cheaper than for new models."

"...Really?"

"Yeah. Instead of making the latest models which cost upwards of tens of thousands of dollars to fly a single sortie, it's better to mass produce low-cost older models. In recent years, the military has apparently valued cost-effectiveness more because of the great number of sorties."

The Air National Guard's base at East Farm was where Christine and Marie were right now.

It was located roughly fifteen kilometers southwest of the New York state capital of Albany.

The National Guard was America's military reserve force. Its members normally lived as ordinary civilians. During emergencies, they joined in disaster relief and security operations under the direction of state governors and might

even carry out combat missions.

The two girls were currently at a training center inside the base.

"Although dragons can breathe fire, their attack range is practically zero in comparison to air-to-air missiles. It's as simple as hitting targets at a shooting range as long as you aim and fire from ten-odd kilometers away."

It was midnight, an hour quite incongruent with Marie's lifestyle as an elementary schooler.

However, this was official training for a new recruit. Hence, Christine continued unperturbed.

The surround screen inside the simulator displayed the air battle situation. Although Marie was sitting in the cockpit, she was not operating the controls. The screen was only replaying the simulated battle against twenty Raptors from just now.

Short-range homing missiles, Sidewinders, took down the lesser dragons one after another.

"However—"

Christine shrugged. By the time they noticed, the Raptors on the screen had closed in to engage within visual range—in other words, close-range combat.

Swarming the fighter jet, there were roughly ten Raptors attacking.

At first, it was still possible to evade the Raptors attacking from unexpected angles by repeated usage of advanced maneuvers such as quick turns, mid-air stops and rapid acceleration. But soon enough, the fuselage was knocked away by a Raptor then torn apart instantly by its swarming companions— Christine spoke quietly, "The difficulty increases dramatically if they get into dogfighting range. These guys are fierce beasts, after all. Humans cannot surpass them in agility or reaction speed. Forget about remote controlled attack drones, even manned fighter jets are unable to surmount that tall barrier."

"....."

"Next—Raptors all target the land, right? Hence, the air squadron's mission is essentially over once the Raptors reach settlements. After all, fighter jets are

not suited to low-altitude combat. Well, that being said, it is possible to fire air-to-surface missiles at Raptors that are rampaging in town."

"Then we become the ones to destroy the town..."

"Yes, with that, the cart is placed before the horse. By this point, it's hard to take down Raptors even if tanks or grenade launchers are mobilized. So that's when it's time for our 'serpents' enter the stage."

"In other words, to help the air force clean up dragons that get past..."

"Exactly. Oh my, frankly speaking, it's almost impossible to lose against Raptors whether in the air or on land. Except if you're unlucky enough to meet an elite."

"Oh, I remember that from training..."

"In addition, elites are able to use summoning magic to gather a flock of Raptors. Protected by magic on these occasions, they don't suffer from the 'hazy state prior to getting used to the atmosphere' mentioned earlier. These Raptors will attack our 'serpents' with lightning speed!"

"...No Summoning Sickness despite being Creatures. So unfair."

"Ahahaha."

Confronted with Marie's gamer-like response, Christine smiled wryly.

"If an elite shows up, they have only two choices. Either grovel and beg for support from a master-class witch or form a united team like ours to mobilize. Precisely because of that, we really look forward to the performance of new members~"

Suitable witch candidates were selected from the National Guard of the various East Coast states to form a team.

This was the concept behind the unit named the WotC. Including the newest addition of Marie, they currently had four witches. Christine was their team leader.

"There was apparently a plan to gather up master-class witches, but it never went anywhere because they're all a bit abnormal in the head. In the end, the current model resulted by prioritizing team efficiency."

"...Aren't you a Master Jedi, Christine?"

"Nope. I am the type with common sense and teamwork. Oh, but I heard earlier during the evening meeting. Recently, a team of witches was formed over in Japan. Reportedly, they have two master magi who are Shootdown Ace class."

Christine took out her smartphone and opened up the information she had received during the day.

A team that had North America's strongest vile witch—Luna Francois Gregory—as well as Europe's "Big Eater" Anastasya Rubashvili.

In addition, there was the Japanese boy who commanded these two top-class witches by virtue of his strength.

Christine clicked up Haruga Haruomi's profile on her phone. Apparently while traveling across the world as a treasure hunter, he had chanced upon Dragonslayer magic.

It was rumored that he had defeated a number of elites and even had combat experience against dragon king-class opponents.

In the photo, this legendary figure—Haruga Haruomi—was staring at the camera with sleepy eyes.

"This guy is the mastermind behind the Japan team."

"...Kind of cute looking. Like a goblin or a golem."

"Aren't those monsters? By the way, I'm not too familiar with RPGs."

"...Slightly different. Probably in between elves and monsters."

"I see. Oh, whatever. Anyway, he looks poorly motivated and lacking in communication skills. However, I think I'm a bit curious about him...?"

For Christine, this was a type she had never met in high school or the National Guard. Curious about something new, she felt a vague sense of affection towards this Japanese boy she had never met before. Currently, his group should be on their way to the East Coast. It would be nice if there was a chance to speak with him. Just as Christine was thinking that to herself— An alarm blared from the speakers installed all over the base.

"...It's our turn to sortie?"

"Dunno yet. But we must get ready straight away. Follow me!"

While issuing orders to Marie, Christine started moving too.

Then she took out her cellphone to call her direct superior, the military consultant assigned by the US Air Force to the Governor of New York.

An air defense system had been built to detect the arrival of dragons as early as possible.

Unfortunately, it was still possible for it to fail in its purpose.

And one actual case occurred this very night in New York. The dragon king ruling over the Old Manhattan Concession suddenly started flying at high speed.

Red Hannibal's destination was the sky over the capital of New York State—Albany.

It was merely a distance of two hundred kilometers or so from Old Manhattan to here.

Traveling time was less than twenty minutes. Decelerating after reaching Albany's airspace, he started a slow descent.

Despite being a state capital, Albany was just a small city.

It was surrounded mostly by natural scenery such as mountains and forests, excellent for enjoying the pleasures of hiking or canoeing. The local population was less than a hundred thousand. Moreover, it was currently late at night.

Hence, very few people witnessed the dragon king's arrival.

However, every one of these people shook to their bones in fear without exception.

At the same time, the military airbases across the East Coast finally issued a "Red Hannibal alert" one after another.

Furthermore, the Governor of New York was heading to the capitol building after receiving an emergency crisis report.

Naturally, Hannibal did not care about the late night hour or the humans of

the lower realm. Landing leisurely in front of the New York State Capitol, he roared loudly.

ROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!

A roar matching the red dragon king's bestial nature.

The majestic roar resounded across every corner in the city of Albany.

People who had gone to bed were roused by this noise. Those who had yet to sleep were frozen with horror and terror occupying their minds and bodies. Unable to withstand such a shock, those afflicted with heart disease clutched their chests, panting. Some people even fainted directly out of fear.

What followed immediately after the roar ended was a fully rational voice.



Using his astounding baritone voice, Hannibal spoke sonorously, "Now then, residents of this city, as well as those of this state, I would like to make a proposal here."

All residents in the city heard the dragon king's voice, just like the roar earlier.

Infused with the dragon king's magical power, the speech was definitely reaching the ears of the people.

"Everyone of the media, I grant you special permission to come closer. But in return, I confer a mission upon you. Every word I say next must be recorded accurately and completely to be disseminated across the people."

Hannibal had even taken into account the reporters who happened to be present. To report on the story, news agencies and television station staff had already driven several vans to rush to the scene from nearby.

They were a group motivated by a mercantile interest in obtaining an exclusive scoop about the great event of the dragon king's arrival.

Facing the cameras and microphones extended from these people, Hannibal spoke, "It has been twenty years since I made my residence in the land known as Manhattan. From what I have heard, this number of years is enough for humans like you to reach the legal age of majority. Furthermore, after reaching adulthood and acquiring the requisite wisdom, they are bestowed the right to stand as a candidate for election—This principle stands as the essence of the 'democracy' you humans invented."

An awe-inspiring speech delivered with clear enunciation.

Compared to the average human, he was more talkative. His English was also very fluent.

The ruler of Old Manhattan—Hannibal. He was not only the dragon king closest to humans but also the spokesman worthy of representing dragonkind.

"And the election for deciding this state's ruler through democratic means will be coming up soon. Thus, I present my request to you all—Allow me to participate in that battle."

Out from Hannibal's mouth came several terms that did not match the image of dragons.

Immediately, the contents of this speech pushed the audience's emotions from astonishment up to greater heights.

"I wish to become this country's... no, the most powerful statesman on earth. I would like to demonstrate to all residents of this state how fortunate they are to live under my protection. I repeat once again, please acknowledge me as a candidate for the election."

Fortunately, those listening to the dragon king's decree included people involved with the military.

The Air National Guard had mobilized fighter jets from the East Farm base fifteen kilometers from Albany and sent three rescue helicopters. One of them was transporting two witches.

Christine Hulk and Marie Thesz.

However, the two of them were coming face to face with the dragon king's majestic visage before they could contact the WotC's other two members.

The ultimate adversary towering over all elites—Red Hannibal.

The dragon king's body was exuding overwhelming magical power and presence, immobilizing Christine and Marie. In fact, these two's 'serpents' could not even accomplish the meager act of stalling for time.

"Let this be all for tonight. I shall reappear before you all in the near future. Save your answer until then. Humans, I look forward to your democratic choice!"

This was the last message left behind by the dragon king.

Having finished speaking, Hannibal spread his wide wings and flew.

Towards the sky—Towards his base of operations, the Old Manhattan Concession. No one dared to get in the way of his flying route.

The story above was the incident of "Hannibal Comes!" that had transpired during midnight on August 7th.

Part 2

Prior to the return of dragons, New York City was divided into five boroughs. Brooklyn, Queens, The Bronx, Staten Island, and Manhattan.

But twenty years ago, the borough of Manhattan was chosen by dragonkind as a concession territory.

As the "face" symbolizing New York City, the area included Wall Street, Central Park, the Rockefeller Center, Times Square... Manhattan and its numerous landmarks fell under the rule of dragonkind, becoming the castle town of the dragon king Hannibal.

But apart from Old Manhattan, the other four boroughs still remained intact in the present day as "New York City."

2pm on August 7th. Hal and his friends were currently at the Bedford neighborhood in Brooklyn. More precisely, it was the parking lot of SAURU's New York branch.

"This year happens to be midterm election year in America."

"What are 'midterm elections'?"

Driving a rented minivan, Hal was just about to enter a perpendicular parking space when Hazumi posed a question to him from the back seat. Sitting next to her, Orihime quietly answered, "I recall that the results of such elections... can be taken as something like an approval rating for the US president?"

"Yes, that's the idea."

Presidents of the United States served terms of four years.

General elections held two years after a presidential election were named *midterms*.

Offices up for election were spread across all kinds of civil servants, including the entire House of Representatives, a portion of the senators, as well as

governors and mayors whose terms were up. These cases were all classified as midterm elections.

The two major parties in America were the Democrats and the Republicans.

And the number of elected Members of Congress and governors in the incumbent president's party was regarded as a major indicator. If numbers decreased, that meant the president's influence was waning.

This included New York State where an election for the governor was scheduled around November.

"Is it possible that Hannibal regularly reads newspapers?"

In half-joking, half-serious tone of voice, Hal remarked while getting off the car.

—This morning, his group had taken a plane here from Boston.

The flight to the entrance of the international metropolis of New York—John F. Kennedy airport—took roughly an hour. Then the trio had split up from Asya to buy supplies and equipment. Their goal was to get ready to infiltrate Hannibal's abode—Old Manhattan.

Hal opened the trunk and unloaded the stuff they had just bought.

Due to the relatively large quantities, the stuff was contained in three separate cardboard boxes. Seeing Orihime and Hazumi approaching to help out, Hal said, "Actually, Hannibal often leaves his concession territory every now and then."

" "Ehhh!?" "

"It's not just when he's attacking . It's usual for him to fly all over the place randomly, wandering New York State where Old Manhattan is located as well as neighboring states and counties, as though he's checking out his territory."

Facing two wide-eyed girls, Hal continued.

"The surrounding residents call his wandering behavior 'Hannibal Comes!' and treat it as a special event, with many department stores and shopping malls holding sales and promotions to commemorate the day too."

"P-People aren't afraid?"

"Isn't he clearly a king of dragonkind like Princess Yukikaze..."

Moving cardboard boxes together with Hal, Hazumi and Orihime expressed their surprise.

They next went to SAURU's New York branch. This was a five-story building whose entire interior was a facility belonging to the organization. The trio stepped into the building from the back door.

Since it was quite old, built in the 1980s, it was not very clean or tidy.

However, this messy place, all covered in dust, was like a homeland to Hal.

"They're afraid but there's nothing they can do. Since they're helpless, they might as well dilute the fear in this kind of joking manner. Furthermore, people have gotten used to it over time since Hannibal has not attacked human cities for a very long time now. It's inevitable for people to think that next time and the time after that probably won't be attacks either."

Why dragon kings did not attack human society aggressively—

By this point, Hal already knew the reason. Because they were not too interested in mere humans, they did not actively harm humans. But if some sort of cause were to arise, they would most likely slaughter and massacre mankind as though eradicating pests without a thought.

But this time, Hannibal had suddenly brought up the word "democracy"...

"By the way, Juujouji, what's your take on how Asya's been acting?"

"You mean her lack of appetite?"

Hal nodded affirmatively in response to Orihime's question.

After flying from Boston to New York, Hal and his group had eaten lunch at a cafe in JFK airport.

Having only eaten a light breakfast, Asya unbelievably ate only a bagel!

Hazumi tilted her head and said, "She must be feeling unwell or she caught a flu, right?"

"If it's Asya, even in those situations, she'd still say 'let's eat something easy to

digest' before gulping down a large pot of porridge. I think there has to be some other reason."

While chatting, the trio went down the stairs to the basement.

They were making their way to the supplies storeroom to put down their cardboard boxes. In addition, Asya had already arrived at this building in advance. Due to a need for a master-class witch's counsel regarding the Hannibal incident, she was currently attending a meeting in the New York branch.

Someone was already in the storeroom before them.

"Yo Hal. It's been a year, hasn't it?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

A middle-aged Caucasian man spoke to him. He was a member of administrative staff who had served at this branch for around three years. Featuring a physique rivaling President M's, he was a thoroughly obese guy.

Since neither Hal nor Asya were visiting this branch for the first time, they were both acquainted with him.

"By the way, there are a few things that I want."

"I heard from Asya. Preparations are already underway."

The man took down a Kevlar rope from a shelf.

Impressive as always, Hal's childhood friend. Knowing clearly what this mission required, she had asked SAURU to obtain supplies as quickly as possible. It looked like Asya had communicated to them in advance.

"Add in the latest map of the Old Manhattan ruins, preferably no older than a month, if possible."

"Leave it to me. It'll be prepared along with everything else that's needed."

Until the end of the twentieth century, SAURU's New York branch had been situated in Manhattan.

Hal's aim was to infiltrate the place and obtain ancient texts related to King Solomon. Both this man here and Asya understood clearly what support the

mission required. Despite being of different professions, they were working in the same field after all. This ease of communication was very helpful.

While Hal was filled with gratitude, the Caucasian man laughed and said, "You really have it tough. There are many rumors about you. No need to be shy, just let me know if you need help with small stuff like this."

After glancing at Orihime and Hazumi who were following Hal closely, he made a thumbs-up.

Apparently, news of Haruga Haruomi's acquisition of a dragonslaying rune had already spread within SAURU. Hal smiled wryly in response. Auntie Yulia's reason for making a personal visit to Tokyo was probably the same as his.

"You're helping me out a lot. Thanks."

"Oh? You can pay me back with interest when you make it big. By the way, Asya—"

The man suddenly frowned in puzzlement.

"What happened to her? I was enjoying a whole dozen of donuts when talking to her just now. I can't believe that Asya didn't say 'gimme some!'!"

" " " " " "

Hal frowned. Beside him, Orihime and Hazumi also showed worry on their faces.

The two girls were not very good at listening to English but still could get a rough idea that the man was noting that something was strange about Asya. Putting that aside, Hal wondered what was up with his childhood friend.

"Let's have a look to see how she's doing."

After setting down their belongings, Hal and company took the elevator to the fifth floor.

They entered the meeting room on the far end after knocking lightly at the door. Sitting at an oval desk were three members of the New York branch. Asya was with them but— "Listen, Asya. Indeed, we issued a harsh protest last year because you consumed all of the branch's on-hand supplies of canned food and instant noodles..."

"But no matter what, we never forbade you from eating the snacks laid out here."

"In any case, we are very worried about the state of your health. Please, pick something you like to eat. If there isn't enough, we'll send someone out to buy more. No need to hold back!"

Three male members of staff at the branch were talking to the silver-haired girl.

In the center of the table were three bags of chips, including the most basic salted flavor, salsa flavor, an American classic as well as a trendy teriyaki flavor. In addition, there were sausages, onion rings and cheddar cheese snacks on the table.

All junk food with excessive oil and salt content.

And these were all Asya's favorites—At least, they were supposed to be.

"Fufufu. Thank you for the kind offer, everyone, but don't worry, I'm not hungry at the moment. Please save it for next time."

Smiling demurely, Asya refused food!

Hal could not help but feel shocked. His childhood friend had definitely said the words "I'm not hungry at the moment." It was reality, not a hallucination—How could this be possible!?

Hal stared at Asya without thinking.

This might be the first time in his life for him to stare at her so seriously.

To think that there was a side to Anastasya Rubashvili unknown to Hal when he believed that he had already understood her thoroughly inside out—?

Next, Asya noticed Hal's gaze and slowly turned her head to show a faint smile towards him.

In that instant, Hal unbelievably found that smile incredibly gorgeous. His heart skipped a beat. This was no joke. What was with Asya?

"That Asya is worrying us when we're clearly about to sneak into Manhattan

tomorrow..."

"But Haruga-kun, I definitely don't think there's anything wrong with her health. Perhaps we are the ones who are worrying too much? Rather, it seems that Asya-san is even livelier than usual."

That night after reaching New York, Hal did something he normally would never do. He called a girl to his hotel room to begin a discussion.

The one he was confiding in was Orihime, smiling optimistically.

"Think about it. Always whining about being hungry and quickly complaining about running out of energy, she's like a male lion lazing around on a savanna. But today, it's like she became a different person."

"....."

"Although everyone has been saying how weird it is, the amount of food Asya-san ate today would actually be just right for such a slender girl."

"Hmm—But I totally don't get why she'd suddenly become like this."

"Haruga-kun, do you truly not understand?"

"Yeah, no clue at all."

The instant he replied, Orihime sighed deeply then stared sharply at him.

"Jeez... It's very obvious that she's on a diet!"

"Di—Don't be ridiculous. It's Asya we're talking about here, you know!?"

"You are the one being ridiculous, Haruga-kun! For a girl's weight, even a kilogram... no, even a 500g or 50g difference would be huge. If you need an analogy, there exist girls who might agree to a contract with the devil just to become five kilograms lighter."

"E-Even you, Juujouji?"

"....."

Orihime glared intently at Hal.

Hal deeply regretted asking that. For the first time, he felt fear and pressure because of Orihime.

"Ahem. This isn't about me but my friend. She's the type... whose various sizes are relatively big, so it's only natural for her weight to be proportionally higher. That's why, if the devil came knocking at her door with that kind of deal, perhaps she might really waver a little..."

"For sure, your various parts are amazing, Juujouji."

"Don't get the wrong idea! This is about my friend, not me!"

"Ah, yes."

Scolded harshly, Hal immediately straightened his back.

Apparently satisfied with his reaction, Orihime stared at Hal and suddenly changed the subject.

"Putting that aside, Haruga-kun, I believe there are more pressing matters to worry about tonight than dieting."

"There are?"

"Of course. For tomorrow's infiltration operation into the Manhattan Concession, I expect you and Asya-san will be carrying it out alone, right? Aren't you being slightly too cautious about this? Wasn't it much more relaxed when we went to the Old Tokyo Concession?"

Setting off to Old Tokyo in the afternoon after having just made the decision in the morning. This was a set pattern when operating in Tokyo New Town previously.

However, a lot of time and energy had been spent on equipment and information gathering in preparation for this operation.

"This time's target is a place that's several times more troublesome than Old Tokyo, after all. The one in Tokyo is just a wasteland where getting around is inconvenient but Old Manhattan is inhabited by all kinds of dangerous monsters."

"Monsters!?"

"That being said, there shouldn't be a huge problem. As I am now, I own a magic wand—that gun—while Asya's Rushalka is also in peak form. It'll actually be easier if it's just us two."

"...I guess you are right."

Orihime sighed and smiled—That smile was probably made on purpose.

"Originally, I really wanted to come along because I was worried about you two. But now that I feel like I might get in the way instead, never mind. If you and Asya-san truly needed assistance from me and Hazumi, you would have counted us in when deciding teams from the start."

"Uh, well—"

"It's fine. I can understand your considerations."

"....."

Usage of *leviathan* powers had to be minimized as much as possible during this infiltration operation.

In that case, a two-man team consisting of only Hal and Asya would be the best choice. As expected of Juujouji Orihime, who was great at reading between the lines, she understood on her own without needing Hal to explain explicitly.

Ever since he met her this spring, Hal had found her observant personality to be very helpful at all times.

Realizing this fact again, Hal was suddenly struck by a thought.

"Speaking of which, it's been quite a while since we last chatted alone together."

"After all, Haruga-kun, you went to Papua New Guinea earlier and after coming to America, we've been going around as a group most of the time..... Oh."

Seeing Orihime suddenly fall silent, Hal asked, "What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing... It's nothing. I simply remembered something because you mentioned about being alone together. Pay it no heed. I also feel it's also a bit too impolite for me to suddenly ask such a personal question..."

"Anyway, let me hear it first. I'll answer as long as it's within my knowledge."

"R-Really? Well... Do you and Luna-san frequently spend time alone together?"

"!?"

"B-Because, didn't Luna-san confess to you last time? Also, the two of you traveled abroad and e-even did *that*..."

Hal shook. By *that*, she was presumably referring to kissing Luna.

It happened once during the Izu expedition. Prior to coming to America, there was another one, kept secret from the others. Although it was not Hal's intention, the second time had even taken place under the public eye.

Seeing Hal's panicked look, Orihime silently bowed her head.

"So you do intend to go out with Luna-san...?"

"O-Of course not. Although I'm very grateful for her suggestion, we haven't progressed to that stage yet. Besides, won't having a romantic relationship within the team be a hindrance to work? Personally, I find that social relationships become troublesome when they become too close, so it's best to avoid that like the plague after all!"

For example, suppose Chief A and Subordinate B became a couple.

This could cause Chief A to favor B excessively, causing other subordinates to feel disgruntled. Conversely, B might actively demand special treatment. Things might be fine if Chief A and B were on good terms, but if the two of them were to fight, the group dynamic would fall to rock bottom...

"To prevent that kind of predicament, the first priority is to forbid romance within the team!"

"But in America school dramas, don't couples quickly form within the group?"

"Ah, yes. Those are quite outrageous. Breaking up within a couple months then immediately hooking up with another friend—But those are merely fictional plots!"

"But if it's you and Luna-san, I get the feeling you'd say 'just keep it underground' and date secretly without telling the rest of us—"

"Yes, because Luna and I are both devious, that's very possible—"

Hal raised the volume of his voice, trying hard to dispel Orihime's doubt.

"But this kind of thing definitely won't happen. I swear to God!"

"You sound like a liar when you swear to God or heaven and earth so easily..."

"Oh, otherwise, let me lay my conscience on the line. A Christian in the same situation would say 'I swear by the Bible that the testimony I give shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth' just like in front of a judge!"

Hal spoke excitedly to the distrustful Orihime.

However, somewhere in a corner of his mind, he found this unbelievable. Why was he trying his hardest to explain? What was the big deal even if suspicions were directed at him?

After all, he and Luna were not lovers and this was the unmistakable truth (although it was also true that they had kissed).

Next, Hal figured it out roughly.

This kind of situation was not completely unrelated to why he had been able to hit the brakes in the nick of time when almost devoured by the American girl's charm on several occasions. In fact, every time when Hal's heart started pounding due to Luna's bold courtship, he would frequently think of *Orihime* involuntarily.

"Juuji..."

"B-By the way, Haruga-kun, if the fact that Luna-san k-kissed you is what makes you uneasy, would sharing a kiss with someone else—Make things alright?"

"Huh?"

"B-Basically, if another girl were to kiss you, would that allow you to treat her like Luna-san... Something like that....."

"I think—probably, maybe..."

"....."

The two of them were alone in a room. Gazing into each other's eyes, in a hotel while on a trip. Hal trembled slightly from the nervous tension his body and mind had never felt before. Orihime felt very nervous too.

For some reason, Hal was quite certain. At this very moment, neither of them needed further words.

Similarly, for some reason, Orihime was also certain of the same thing—That they could reach mutual understanding just by gazing at each other.

After that, all they needed was a trigger no matter how tiny. Indeed, like what Orihime was doing right now—gazing at Hal with moist eyes—slowly drawing up closer to him at the same time.

Hal extended his right hand, intending to take Orihime's hand—At that instant...



RIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIING!

The cellphone on the bedside suddenly rang.

The two of them suddenly came to their senses and looked at the cellphone together. Hal swiftly picked up the call.

"What's up, Asya? Is there some kind of emergency?"

"No, but it's about work. I'd like to discuss tomorrow's rundown with you, Haruomi, can I visit your room?"

"Oh..... Sure. Of course you can."

Realizing the situation, Orihime nodded at Hal, so he immediately agreed. However, although there was just a momentary pause, the caller on the other side instantly reacted.

"Is there someone there right now by any chance?"

"!? N-No."

"Really? Then I'm coming over now. See you later."

After the call ended, Orihime said "then I'll be off first" and stood up from her chair.

Seeing her off at the doorway, Hal heard an unexpected question just as they were parting.

"U-Umm. Next time... May I still come over to visit you? I... would like to have a good chat with you when we're both free, to relax or something—"

"U-Us?"

Hal originally wanted to ask "just the two of us?" but switched to a more tactful wording in the end.

As a result, Orihime looked shyly at Hal and nodded.

"Y-Yes. As long as it doesn't bother you..."

"Not at all. You're welcome any time."

Hal answered her immediately, eliciting a blushing smile from Orihime.

Ten minutes later, Hal held a brief meeting with Asya who had come to his room. The pounding in his heart from spending time with Orihime still lingered but he carefully concealed it, preventing it from showing on his face.

After Asya left, Hal went to bed at around 11pm. Lying on the bed, he began to ponder.

He expected it would not be until afternoon before departing to infiltrate the concession territory. In that case, he should sleep in till late morning, to conserve his energy fully... However, this easily ended up wishful thinking on his part.

Early next morning, the New York sky was blotted out by a flock of almost a thousand Raptors.

Part 3

The time the anomaly occurred was 6:22 am on August 8, early in the morning to boot.

The Raptors descended en masse with almost a thousand of them crashing down collectively like a meteor rain—

Normally speaking, there would be a few hours of buffer time between them breaking through the atmosphere and reaching a city's airspace.

But this time, what called them to the ground was dragonkind's summoning magic.

Merely a minute or two elapsed between them penetrating the atmosphere at 6:22 and arriving in the air above Jamaica Bay at New York City. It was a record that laughed in the face of common sense and the laws of physics.

Most specialists in the field of dragons would despair when confronted by such a situation, expecting the utter destruction of New York City.

However, the Raptors simply circled in the air over Jamaica Bay without attacking the surface, flying back and forth across the sky.

By 7:45 am, Hal also arrived at a beach on Jamaica Bay.

Naturally, he was accompanied by Asya, Orihime and Hazumi. Accepting the request from SAURU's New York branch, they arrived on the scene to assist in handling the situation.

Overhead in the sky, a terrifying number of Raptors were flying in flocks.

However, there were no elite dragons among them.

"Where the heck is the elite that summoned them...?"

"Speaking of elites in New York City, there's definitely a dragon king living here..."

" " " "

Asya was evidently thinking of the worst-case scenario. Hal sighed simultaneously. The possibility of an elite running over to "cause trouble" near a dragon king's territory was extremely unlikely.

"B-But thank goodness. Fortunately, they came to somewhere uninhabited."

Surveying the scenery surrounding Jamaica Bay, Hazumi commented.

Located south of New York City, Jamaica Bay was connected to the Atlantic Ocean.

However, the majority of the bay consisted of wetlands. At the same time, it was a protected natural reserve. The bay's vast wetlands were full of flourishing trees with freshwater ponds and marshland scattered within.

This protected zone's area was actually nine thousand acres, roughly three hundred square kilometers.

The area was several times that of the Old Tokyo Concession.

"It's also possible that the Raptors' summoner deliberately chose this location?"

"To avoid harming the residents of New York? In that case, there is a high chance that it's Mr. Hannibal who has announced his candidacy in the governor election..."

Hearing Hal's whisper, Orihime gasped.

The three witches from Japan had already materialized their partners. The three "serpents" were standing by on the beach of Jamaica Bay.

Europe' strongest Shootdown Ace—Blue Rushalka the wyvern.

The white nine-tailed fox-wolf, Akuro-Ou.

The unconventionally colored serpentine dragon leviathan Minadzuki lacking a horn counterpart.

Rushalka was standing upright on her hind legs like a bird on the ground whereas Akuro-Ou was lying down on the ground like a trained dog. On the other hand, Minadzuki had her slender body rolled up in a coil.

However, Hal and his team were not the only dragon specialists on this beach.

Several kilometers from their location, another team was also on standby. They were the four witches of the WotC and their partners.

All of their leviathans were quadrupedal felines dozens of meters in body length.

The lynx "Tom Cat" with dazzling silver fur. The ferocious albino tiger "Tiger Cat." The black panther "Wild Cat" whose entire body was shrouded in lightning and sparks. Then there was the feline that resembled a rotund bear, standing and walking upright on hind legs, "Bear Cat."

These four leviathans stood as the WotC's combat potential.

Ground forces were also deployed along the coastline of Jamaica Bay.

Prior to the arrival of Hal's team, the army had already transported to the scene all kinds of weapons imaginable, including M1 tanks, multiple launch rocket systems, *etc.*

However, the human side had yet to launch any attacks.

"That's to avoid unnecessary casualties and military spending. No point taking unknown risks."

Next to Hal, Asya explained to Orihime and Hazumi.

"Rushalka and I can clear out 90% of them within five minutes if it's just this quantity of Raptors. Akuro-Ou and Minadzuki could probably wipe out the rest. Any ones missed could be allowed to escape back to the wild. Of course, it'd be a different matter if they intend to attack settlements—"

Glaring sharply at the invading Raptors, Asya issued a bold declaration.

Over a month had gone by since her partner's revival and acquisition of Queen Form. By now, Asya had fully comprehended and mastered the powers of Rushalka who had become far stronger than she ever was.

Hence, Asya had the right to brag. Failure was impossible.

"How will the enemy mastermind make a move... That's what's crucial. Let's watch until there's movement. Please cover me depending on the situation."

Gathered at this battlefield was the army and the WotC. Orders had already

been issued to them through SAURU: They were to focus on their role as support and forbidden from engaging in combat recklessly to avoid hindering Rushalka's full mobility.

In other words, Asya and Rushalka were the main stars on the human side.

As for the main role on the dragon side—He finally made a gradual appearance from the south.

South of Jamaica Bay was the Atlantic Ocean. Rising from the other side of the horizon, Red Hannibal was leading his Army of Fire, flying towards them.

Behind the dragon king were roughly three hundred "lizard-shaped flames."

The salamanders had a body length of seven meters, on the order of Raptors in size.

"Is that the Army of Fire—Hannibal's minions!?"

While summoning the magic gun in his right hand, Hal cried out.

For the past twenty years, Red Hannibal had seldom appeared on the battlefields between dragonkind and humanity, rare enough to count on one hand. However, when deemed necessary, he would appear with the Army of Fire under his command.

His minions were neither dragons, leviathans nor dragon subspecies. Instead, they were fire spirits.

Towards the beach where Hal was located, Hannibal and his great army approached at high speed.

Was he planning to converge with the Raptors here to then launch an all-out offensive? Anyone would consider this possibility, but at that moment, Hannibal emitted a thunderous roar.

"Thank you for your patience, humans! You saved me a lot of trouble by gathering here before you were summoned! My election campaign is about to begin this moment!"

"What election...? Is he really sticking to that candidate story from before?" Hal muttered quietly

Hannibal's voice was infused with magical power.

Like last time at Albany, this was to allow all citizens to hear his speech. Compared to Albany, New York City covered a much greater area, but Hannibal's magical power was probably enough to allow a dragon king's decree to reach every corner.

The thousand Raptors circling in the air started to take action again.

The flock of dragons had been flying back and forth in the air without causing trouble so far, but in the next instant, an attack impulse erupted. The thousand Raptors all flew towards their target.

Indeed, the ferocious beasts launched an attack—Their target was Hannibal's army!

"I summoned these winged lizards from the sky. Seeking to become the ruler of you all, I shall display my level of power by using them as my opponents. I wish to demonstrate a king's power through action without wasting any more breath on words!"

"—Suddenly going completely against the principles of democracy!"

The dragon king's statement was truly deserving of ridicule.

However, no sooner had Hal spoken than the battle began. No, rather than battle, it was actually no different from a massacre. One-sided slaughter.

At the forefront, Hannibal charged into the enemy ranks, leading his army of salamanders.

Confronting this conspicuous enemy commander, the Raptors roared loudly and swarmed him.

Gahhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Gahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Gahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Most likely due to the effects of mind control magic, the Raptors' attack impulse was amplified greatly. Otherwise, there was no way they could engage in such insubordination against a dragon king standing at the pinnacle of their

race.

However, the poor Raptors were unable to touch a single hair of Hannibal's despite the best efforts from their sharp claws and teeth.

Three hundred salamanders—the Army of Fire—deployed a defensive line around the dragon king in three hundred and sixty degrees, forming a shield with their bodies.

As soon as they touched the salamanders, the Raptors immediately caught fire.

Within a brief instant, flames spread all over the Raptors touched by the salamanders, enveloping them in an intense blaze, incinerating them utterly, causing them to crash to the ground.

Everything touched by the salamanders were turned to ash within an instant. This was the magical power of the Army of Fire.

Some of the Raptors were exhaling high-temperature blue-white flames.

However, the salamanders were shrouded in even hotter flames. The Raptor's scorching breaths were completely unable to inflict any damage at all.

Finally, the thousand Raptors were literally turned into fireballs, crashing down slowly into Jamaica Bay. The one-sided massacre ended.

Seeing this tragic sight, Orihime said softly, "I-It's just like the Battle of Nagashino. Nobunaga's three-stage attack delivered a devastating defeat to Takeda's cavalry forces..."

"It's also quite similar to the First World War. Fortified in trenches, defending armies used machine guns to kill approaching infantry, hundreds, thousands at a time."

"This kind of result isn't unusual as long as the defending side holds a minimum level of firepower."

Asya and Hal started to chat about inconsequential things.

Although the trio were consciously trying to lighten the atmosphere, the tone of their voices was quite somber. Had Hannibal the intention, he could aim this immense firepower at the humans below him any time he wanted.

Meanwhile, Hazumi concentrated her gaze below on her own.

"Oh no... The fires need to be put out fast!"

Turned into fireballs, most of the Raptors were burned away during their fall without any bones remaining.

However, some of them managed to crash into ground before they had incinerated completely.

Indeed, the battlefield was in the sky over Jamaica Bay but the bay included over nine thousand acres of wetlands.

Composed mostly from swamps, forests and grassland, it was a paradise for birds and beasts.

If the burning Raptors fell on the wetlands, all the vegetation would burn up from the fire.

Seeing fires lit up all over the wetlands, the wild birds flew into the air successively to escape. Witnessing this scene, Hazumi could not help but cry out, "Please, Minadzuki! Hurry and stop those flames!"

An abstract order lacking in specifics.

"Serpents" could not be controlled skillfully without vivid mental imagery and strong force of will. This was common sense in the world of witches.

Nevertheless, Hazumi's wish was both pure and sincere. Hence, Minadzuki responded to her successfully.

Rahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh—

Coiled up on the ground until just now, Minadzuki sang with a wonderful voice and arched her neck.

Immediately, she invoked the pseudo-divinity of Wind. The serpentine dragon leviathan released her entire body's magical power and flew swiftly towards the great wetlands of Jamaica Bay.

In the next instant, the surrounding fires were all extinguished within the blink of an eye.

After that, there were still dozens of burning Raptors falling to the ground,

but the flames disappeared without trace the instant they made contact.

Using pseudo-divinity, Minadzuki had succeeded in creating a barrier to seal flames away.

"I see, eliminating oxygen particles from the air..."

Hal nodded. So-called wind ultimately consisted of air currents. Minadzuki had removed from the air the oxygen particles required for combustion, thereby sealing the flames away.

"Responding to a young maiden's prayer, how unbelievably smart."

"Since Hazumi-san and Minadzuki have taken charge of protecting the environment, looks like there's nothing left for us to do... Well, let's see what *he* is planning to do next."

Asya stared at Hannibal in the air.

The dragon king was guarded by the salamander army. Unlike Hal, who had summoned his magic gun, Hannibal was not holding a dragonslaying weapon. To him, the previous scene was nothing more than a statement delivered as though one were humming a tune casually.

Currently, only about a hundred Raptors remained.

With 90% of them immolated, the mental state of the survivors seemed to return to normal at last.

One after another, the Raptors started to flee in the face of Hannibal's army. They flew at full speed in separate directions, trying to escape from the dragon king's presence as quickly as possible.

To hunt them down, the three hundred salamanders finally left Hannibal's side.

The fire spirits were flying haphazardly overhead, bringing the Raptor hunt to a climax. At that moment, Orihime spoke in amazement, "Look... Aren't they acting a bit strange?"

Orihime's pale finger was pointed at the leviathans on the ground.

Rather than the partners of Hal's teammates, they were the WotC's four

feline leviathans.

Tom Cat, Tiger Cat, Wild Cat and Bear Cat.

The four leviathans were exuding unnatural blood lust, arching their backs like cats, baring their fangs, vocally threatening the salamanders in the air. Fierce growls were coming from their mouths.

To pacify them, their partners, the four witches, were desperately calling out to them from the side.

Slightly surprised, Asya used Magical Power Inspection magic.

"Minadzuki's Anti-Fire is not the only magic cast on the area. There is also the Stampede spell Hannibal used on the Raptors—That's the magic affecting them right now!"

"B-But why are Akuro-Ou and the others clearly fine!?"

"They're probably guarded by Haruomi's rune. However, the 'serpents' over there don't have the same protection...!" Asya answered Orihime's doubt.

Finally, the feline leviathans ignored the four witch partners' restraining orders and flew into the sky together to launch an offensive on the airborne salamanders.

The WotC team of witches were neither master-class nor protected by the power of dragonbane.

Their partners could not possibly be a match for Hannibal's minions. At this rate, they were surely going to be killed tragically.

"Stand down!"

Hal drew out magical power from his heart and instantly cast Magic Dispel.

Imbuing this spell into his magic gun's bullets, he shot four times in succession with lightning speed. The crimson bullets of light homed in autonomously, catching up to the WotC's cats.

The four bullets all struck the four feline leviathans accurately.

That being said, he only aimed for their hind legs—the paws. To avoid causing severe injuries, he had deliberately chosen targets far away from the hearts, *i.e.*

the heartmetals.

The pain and the impact caused the cats' flying speed to drop suddenly.

"I'm leaving the rest to you all!"

"No problem. Rushalka, approach them and pull them down from the sky!"

"I'm counting on you too, Akuro-Ou. Don't let them go over there."

Responding to Hal's request, Asya and Orihime gave instructions.

Kyuahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Kuohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Standing by on the ground until just now, Rushalka and Akuro-Ou cried out loudly then ascended immediately. They easily caught up to the WotC's cats that had slowed down.

Then circling repeatedly in the air, they guided the injured cats back to the ground.

The four feline leviathans obediently followed Rushalka and Akuro-Ou. They had regained their sanity.

The bullets infused with Magic Dispel had successfully freed them from the Stampede curse.

Meanwhile, with the disturbance in the witches' ranks quelled, the aerial battle—or perhaps more aptly, a mock battle—had already been settled. The salamanders had annihilated all remaining Raptors.

"Well then, everyone in power..."

The ruler of this sky—Hannibal—announced sonorously.

"That is all. I hope that it fulfilled its role as my first speech. Although I have demonstrated merely the tip of the iceberg in regards to my power, I believe all of you are now able to understand my capacity as a powerful leader. Next, I shall set up a venue to meet and talk with the incumbent governor. I believe there are many details to discuss regarding my participation in the election!"

Having said that, Hannibal immediately withdrew.

Leading his Army of Fire, the red dragon king flew north.

In that direction was the Old Manhattan Concession. It was not only his residence but also the area where Hal and Asya were going to infiltrate next.

Part 4

In this manner, the Hannibal farce at Jamaica Bay came to a close.

After the dragon king, who served as screenwriter, director and lead actor, as well as the salamanders serving as extras had left, Hal was inexplicably surrounded by a group of girls and *received with hospitality*.

When they were wandering around to verify the surrounding situation after the battle—

He was suddenly grabbed by the WotC and dragged to their temporary command center. A party tent, commonly seen during outdoor events in Japan, was set up on the beach at Jamaica Bay. They even had long tables of foldable tatami and other simple furnishings.

Dressed in the uniform of the Air National Guard's uniform, four girls were currently gathered around Hal.

"Thank you so much for just now! It's all because of you that we were saved," Christine Hulk spoke with a dazzling smile.

She opened a can of coke with a pop and handed it to Hal.

Her tone of voice was like a boy's but she was blonde with an outstanding figure. More specifically, she had a magnificent bust, highly conspicuous in how it filled out and stretched her Air National Guard uniform.

Christine was the leader of the WotC team.

"When the serpents went out of control, I was already bracing myself for the worst. But you showed up gallantly and rescued us. Yes, it's all thanks to you."

"Not at all. It wasn't anything amazing."

"Is this attitude what they call Japanese modesty? As expected of the man of legend, you're definitely different from the rest!"

"You're too kind. Putting that aside, Miss Christine, don't you think you're

being a bit too close?"

"Oh sorry. That's because we're always like this between teammates."

Hal was sitting on a pipe chair. Christine swiftly placed a chair by his side and sat down too.

However, there was almost no separation between her and Hal. The blonde witch from the East Coast was pressing herself tightly against the Japanese boy. Thanks to that, the scent of Christine's perfume was etched firmly into Hal's memory.

Due to his nature as a closet pervert, Hal was conscious of his own involuntary leering.

That being said, he also had a gentleman's pride, of course. Hal coughed deliberately and tensed his face solemnly again.

"Do you find it off-putting? Sorry about that."

"I don't dislike it at all. Indeed. *Mo muntai* for me."

"Ahaha, why are you suddenly speaking Chinese? Oh, and just Christine please. Can I call you Hal?"

"Of course."

While Hal was nodding, a girl who looked like a grade schooler came over.

This was the youngest in the team, Marie Thesz, twelve years old. Lacking in facial expression. A head of brown hair. The young girl said "here" and presented a pizza takeout box to Hal.

"Here you go. Thanks for just now."

"You're welcome..."

Marie appeared to be what was known as the wordless archetype. Incidentally, the pizza was a margherita all covered with mozzarella cheese. Speaking of which, Hal had rushed to the scene without any time to have breakfast.

"A discount promotion after Hannibal's appearance... It's soon becoming something of a New York specialty."

Taking a slice of pizza, Hal began to eat, relishing the treat.

"So pizza deliveries extend to battlefields nowadays?"

"They get used to it over time... I guess the reason's probably something like that."

The one who answered him was the third member of the WotC, Maneesha Kaul.

Sixteen years old. An Indian girl with an olive complexion, dressed in military uniform, her head and shoulders hidden under a pink shawl. Her gorgeous long hair, sleek and black, reached down to her waist.

Maneesha smiled gracefully. Both her poise and manner of speaking were very dignified.

"The pizza delivery service we used on this occasion offers a half price deal if you order within thirty minutes of Hannibal's appearance."

Hal speculated that Maneesha was surely a well-bred young lady from the rich upper-class.

Then there was a sudden "thud!" Hal looked to see a can of beer set down forcefully on the table before him.

Standing 185cm tall, a statuesque African-American witch with a model's figure, Kate Patterson.

She was the one who had put down the beer. Opening another can of beer with her left hand, she leaned her head back for a hearty swig.

"Here's your reward. Drink."

"It's a shame but I'm still a minor."

Nodding with a response of "really?" to Hal's unhesitating answer, Kate continued to drink her beer heartily. Looking to be in her twenties, wearing a pair of mirrored sunglasses, she was undoubtedly the epitome of cool. Awesomeness personified.

"How much do you earn? Annual salary."

"Huh?"

Hal was surprised by Kate's sudden question.

Christine, Marie and Maneesha also looked in their direction with interest.

"You are a capable man just as we heard. And today, we confirmed it with our own eyes."

"After knowing this, we would like very much to have someone talented like you, which is why I'm asking to see how much remuneration is required to sign an exclusive contract with you."

Kate and Christine explained alternately.

"Although our magical power is less than the master magi, we get along great together. Our compatibility and teamwork are excellent despite our idiosyncrasies. Basically, my team does not recruit witches who have personality problems or lack adaptability."

"That is so true."

Two years ago in Copenhagen, Hal had shared a table with five master-class witches including Asya.

At the time, he was serving as an escort for witches of widely varying nationalities, ages, personalities, interests and religious faiths. He was assigned the task of taking them out for dinner.

Every time Hal found a candidate restaurant on the internet and asked "How about this one?" Someone other than Asya would inevitably express their discontent and say "You're going to make me eat that kind of food!?" These witches were clearly not kindergarteners, yet none of them were willing to compromise.

Recalling the hardship on that occasion, Hal found the WotC girls to be as endearing as angels in comparison.

That being said, Hal also had his own considerations. He spoke to the leader, Christine, "I currently have no intention of joining any group exclusively, so I must decline your kind offer."

"Got it. I think there will be many more opportunities to work together in the future, so I'll look forward to that. Can you give me your cellphone number?"

"Sure."

"Can I call you for a chat from time to time and invite you for dates outside of work?"

"Of course—What did you just say?"

"Personal dates. Going out, just the two of us."

"Why!?"

"Because you've aroused my curiosity. I'd be delighted if you don't decline when I ask you out. Well then, see you in a few days, Hal. I think we will be meeting for a discussion about Hannibal!"

After getting surprised by the smiling Christine, Hal exited the event tent.

Then he was surprised again—Asya was walking over.

"Perfect, I was just looking for you, Haruomi. You came over here as expected."

"Expected? Did the WotC call you?"

"No, it was just an instinctive hunch."

"....."

Finding him by instinct alone. How beyond common sense. However, Asya was a witch. Added to that fact was her beast-like sixth sense and intuition.



Deciding that there was nothing strange in that case, Hal listened to his childhood friend's cold voice.

"Your lecher face is showing, Haruomi."

"Huh!?"

"You must have come across something good to do with girls... Am I wrong?"

"D-Don't be silly. Let's hurry on our way. There's still time today, so let's sneak into Old Manhattan as planned."

It was not yet 10am, so there was no need to change their afternoon plans.

After being questioned by Asya, Hal secretly cocked his head. After reducing her food intake, something seemed to have changed with his childhood friend—This thought surfaced in his mind.

The Old Manhattan Concession.

Located on the mouth of Hudson River, this vast sandbank was Manhattan Island.

This used to be the center of New York City, an urban metropolis filled with towering skyscrapers. A land whose every inch was covered by buildings. High-rise buildings, putting even the Tower of Babel to shame, were too many to count.

However, the skyscrapers in this land were devoid of *human* residents. It had become a city of forsaken ruins.

"Well, it is home to non-human monsters on the other hand."

"Get ready to activate magical sight any time, Haruomi."

After the unexpected event, they finally arrived at their true destination.

Hal and Asya were riding a large military four-wheel-drive vehicle.

The Old Manhattan Concession was located on a river island at the mouth of the Hudson. Whether via sea or air, trespassing was explicitly forbidden according to the terms of the original treaty establishing this land as a concession territory.

On the north side of Manhattan—starting from the Bronx—all roads had been blockaded securely.

All bridges leading here had been demolished or dismantled, with only one exception—Manhattan Bridge on the southern tip of Manhattan Island.

Only this bridge remained open and unrestricted.

...As for why this bridge had been kept, there was an urban legend circulating.

'A door needs to be open to enable dialogue with the humans as necessary.'

Hannibal had conveyed such a message.

Disregarding whether it was actually true or not, in any case, Hal and Asya made their way to the concession territory from Manhattan Bridge.

Asya was the one gripping the steering wheel whereas Hal was in the front passenger seat with his magic gun in hand on standby. This was a distribution of roles to prevent the local inhabitants from attacking them.

In fact, they immediately discovered as soon as they entered the concession territory.

A white orb of light was floating around, wandering the streets.

Roughly the size of a basketball, this type of supernatural being was named the "fire elemental" by scholars.

Arriving at the Chinatown near Manhattan Bridge, Hal said, "Asya, I want to fire a test shot to see the extent of effects. It's necessary to confirm."

"You're right. Despite being a ridiculous magical weapon, it still falls under the category of *firearm*."

After stopping the car, the two of them went outside. Hal and Asya activated magical sight.

They ended up discovering trouble apart from the fire elementals they saw just now.

Spirits without physical form were wandering the concession territory like pedestrians.

Gray vortexes, amorphous black shadows, humanoid figures with ambiguous outlines—Hal and Asya's magical sight allowed them to discern the appearances of spirits.

"Dead spirits, ghosts, vengeful spirits, evil spirits, elemental spirits, miscellaneous spirits... Probably a long list like that if one had to categorize all the different spirits gathered in Old Manhattan. It feels like you'll catch some kind of unknown curse even if you pass by them discreetly."

"Oh well, you're a a master-class witch, Asya, while I have imperishable protection," responding to his childhood friend's whispers, Hal shrugged.

"Spirit issues should be resolvable somehow. The fire elementals still take priority after all."

Hal pointed the muzzle of his gun at the ground then took out a silencer to attach securely to it.

Then he fired two shots—Bang, bang. The bullets of light were expelled with fainter gunshots than usual and chipped away a piece of the asphalt. Hal and Asya immediately looked around them.

The white orb of light—the fire elemental—multiplied from one into three.

It had divided. During that instant of the magic bullets' impact.

"Relative to just now, the temperature has risen two degrees too."

Asya took out an electronic thermometer and reported to Hal.

This Old Manhattan Concession was Hannibal's territory where the Army of Fire was stationed.

Naturally, spirits of the fire alignment resided within the territory. If high-temperature flames were to appear, nearby fire spirits would activate.

There would be nothing to worry about if all these firefly-like orbs of light did was multiply, but—

Hal and Asya returned to the car and continued to drive.

"As suspected, even my gun will stimulate the fire elementals."

It was imperative to avoid using tools and machinery that produced fire or heat.

Hal shared the first piece of insight he had obtained after infiltrating the Old Manhattan Concession.

In that case, they should actually avoid using cars that relied on petrol engines. However, even the heat from electric engines or human body warmth was enough to activate fire elementals.

—Using low-heat, low-speed means of locomotion would increase the duration of their stay.

—Conversely, using high-heat, high-speed movement would decrease the duration of their stay.

With the risks being similar, Hal and Asya decided on the latter. Their target was the Upper East Side, a residential area containing their ultimate destination—the former SAURU New York branch.

After leaving the job of driving to Asya completely, Hal sank deep into the front passenger seat.

Manhattan was an elongated area stretching north-south.

Its area was roughly the sum of Old Tokyo's Chiyoda, Shinjuku, Chūō and Minato wards. Upper East Side was located in the mid-portion of Manhattan while the bridge Hal and Asya crossed was on the south end.

"From here to our destination, we'll need to make a huge detour."

"Because many roads are no longer usable. It's a chaotic city that's easy to get disoriented in, after all. Please understand."

Not long before becoming a concession territory, Manhattan had suffered a large-scale assault from dragonkind.

As a result, collapsed buildings and debris were scattered all over the streets.

Due to many blocked roads and obstacles, it was hard to increase the driving speed. In the end, they had to keep making detours.

Furthermore, Asya was already using the shortest route determined through the latest satellite images.

Even though they were driving from Chinatown at southern Manhattan to the middle of the area, they had to make a large detour to the western part of town. If New York citizens from the previous century were told about this route, they would probably end up completely puzzled. Currently, there were almost

no usable roads in southern Manhattan.

Their speed ranged from thirty to fifty kilometers per hour, changing nonstop depending on road conditions.

In this manner, the pair were driving in the western part of Old Manhattan—

By the time they noticed, there were already more than a hundred fire elementals following the heat emanating from the military vehicle.

"It's almost time to get out, right?"

"This is the limit..."

The next instant after their whispered exchange, the gathered elementals started to merge together.

The hundred or so orbs of light that were present so far merged to take on a "lizard" shape and started to burn. The blazing light concentrated to become scorching flames.

—The birth of a salamander.

The spirits living in Old Manhattan were the soldiers in the Army of Fire. Aiming to devour nearby heat sources for nourishment, the salamander flew towards the car that Hal and Asya were driving!

Hal raised the magic gun in his right hand, reached out the window and shot.
Bang!

Struck in the forehead, the salamander was destroyed in an instant.

However, due to this gunshot—plus the heat generated by the salamander—roughly two hundred fire elementals were created as a result. They instantly merged, giving birth to two new salamanders.

"The game of whack-a-mole begins..."

Asya floored the accelerator while murmuring in a whisper.

Unless absolutely necessary, she did not want to call Rushalka out. Summoning a "serpent" in Old Manhattan would cause salamanders to gather in an effort to eliminate her.

The reason for leaving Orihime and Hazumi behind was out of worry for their ability to handle things without using leviathans.

It looked like Hal and Asya were going to face tough times ahead of them.

Part 5

After that, Hal and Asya were attacked by salamanders on six occasions within half an hour.

Despite their lizard-like appearance, they were different from Raptors and not beasts with physical form. Hovering in midair, they were flames imitating the appearance of living creatures.

Apart from that, their legs did not touch the ground even when moving at low altitude. Instead, they pounced while maintaining their hovering state.

The attacking salamanders themselves could be defeated using the magic gun. However, every time Hal did so, the fire elementals would multiply in quantity and continue to pursue Hal and Asya relentlessly.

In spite of that, the two of them still managed to arrive at the south side of Central Park.

This was a metropolitan park located in the heart of Old Manhattan. If one were to view the premises from the air, one would discover that the entire park was shaped like a neat rectangle. Four thousand meters long and eight hundred meters wide, it was quite spacious.

In the past, this used to be a beautiful public park all covered with lush greenery.

Nowadays, it was overgrown with weeds and random trees, giving off a creepy atmosphere.

"Let's switch rides first around here."

"What a waste, even though we expected it'd come to this."

Feeling the time was right, Hal made his suggestion. Asya nodded with a relaxed tone of voice.

The two of them got off the car and took with them the minimum equipment necessary, intending to abandon the vehicle here. After that, even though Asya

had called it "a waste" just now, she was still the first to take out a plastic barrel and pour the contained liquid, prepared ahead of time, all over the military vehicle.

The pungent odor of gasoline could be smelled.

After keeping a safe distance, Asya used Ignition magic.

She tossed a magical fire source at the gasoline-covered car—easily igniting it with an explosion.

Sacrificing the four-wheel-drive military vehicle, the flames instantly erupted and started an intense blaze. Due to a newer, hotter heat source, the fire elementals all started to approach the fire.

Gathered together, the white orbs of light undoubtedly numbered over a thousand.

Initially resembling St. Elmo's fire, it later reached a ridiculous quantity like foxfire. From the great number of spirits, six salamanders were born.

"Next, let's see how long this bonfire can last!"

"Buying twenty minutes or so would be enough. Make it quick, Haruomi!"

Hal and Asya mounted their respective motorbikes.

These were small motorbikes with engine displacements of 50cc. The entire vehicle was only 140cm long, stood no taller than Hal's waist, and weighed less than 70kg. In addition, they could also be folded up.

At such a size, they could be transported by car.

Hence, these two motorbikes had been stowed in the backseat space in the large military vehicle on the way here.

Hal and Asya instantly started up their motorbikes and sped away.

From the south side of Central Park to Upper East Side was a trip requiring roughly half an hour.

Prior to becoming a concession territory, this area was part of a quiet residential neighborhood, but there were almost no detached homes. The majority of residences consisted of condos and apartments.

Hal and Asya's target was an old building made of brick.

It was a location that had been called the SAURU New York branch until twenty years ago.

However, Asya frowned when she arrived in front of the destination. She had probably noticed the unusual atmosphere exuding from the former New York branch building.

Hal noticed it too. Activating magical sight, he tried to scrutinize the building as a whole.

Powerful spiritual energies were coming from the entire building.

No—It would be better to call it miasma. Simply standing near the building, there as a faintly nauseating feeling. It felt as though crying and screaming sounds were coming from underground. Despite the sunny August day, it felt chilling.

Hal deployed imperishable protection around Asya and himself.

The pearly radiance formed an appropriately sized sphere to surround the two of them. The nausea, unpleasant ringing in their ears, and horrible chill all subsided instantly.

"This street itself is a gathering place for bad spirits."

Hal shrugged.

"Since magic-related facilities easily attract those kinds of things—a SAURU branch would naturally become a top paranormal spot."

"Although there's the option of entering and searching inside for a mystery house-like adventure game, I'd rather make it quick right now."

Asya whispered while looking around from time to time.

Until just now, there were no signs of fire elementals visible in this area. But by the time they noticed, a large number of white orbs of light had appeared like fireflies gathering at the edge of water.

Furthermore, a salamander had also shown up on the corner of the opposite street in search for prey.

"...Time to cut corners, right?"

"...It's not every day that I get my hands on a new weapon, after all. Twenty seconds should be enough to deal with it."

While the two of them were conversing in whispers, the salamander at the corner was also approaching.

Then another one appeared behind it. At the same time, three newborn salamanders also arrived at the scene from overhead in low-altitude flight, looking like they were going to attack humans on the ground any moment.

However, imperishable protection was currently defending the two of them.

Their defense was flawless. Hal nodded to his childhood friend.

"O ancient divine seal of purity! Send the transient blue wyvern to my side!" Asya chanted a song of summoning sonorously.

The blue wyvern materialized before the two of them, but at half the size compared to normal, roughly on the same scale as a Raptor or a salamander. Asya must have deliberately made adjustments.

To keep her promise of "twenty seconds," she sought speed and agility.

Hal and issued orders instantly.

"I'm entrusting the queen's power to you too. End it in one go!"

Rushalka's body became equipped with Queen Form armor with mechanical arms to serve as forelimbs.

In addition, there was a change in the magic gun held in Hal's hand—under the barrel with the silencer attached. A bayonet appeared. At the same time, an c appeared in Rushalka's right hand while a kodachi appeared in her left.

The two swords, one big and one small, had slightly curved blades, shaped similar to Japanese swords.

The Rune of the Twin Katana also surfaced on Hal's right palm and the back of Asya's left hand at the same time.

"Rushalka!"

Preparations were already complete so all there was left to do was attack.

Asya yelled, "Use the Rune of the Twin Katana with pseudo-divinity—Turning Spirits!"

The two swords wielded by Rushalka glowed with blue radiance.

Bathed in this light, the gathering salamanders (increased to fifteen already) all stopped moving, rendered frozen. This was sacred light of a binding curse.

Simply exposure to the radiance of the dual swords rendered malevolent spirits immobile—

The instant the binding curse activated, Rushalka also made her move.

Weaving, jumping, flying between fifteen salamanders, she engaged in high-speed movement in all directions. Naturally, she did not neglect to swing her two swords. Every time Rushalka passed by a salamander, she would slash using both the ōdachi in her right and the kodachi in her left, slicing her prey into two.

Within ten-odd seconds, a dragon-like silhouette turned in to blue lightning on a raging rampage.

The final result was the total annihilation of the fifteen salamanders. Obtaining overwhelming victory through instant kills, Rushalka then raised the ōdachi towards the upright building before her—and brought it down, slicing the former New York branch's wall.

One flash. A second flash. A cross-shaped mark was carved upon the wall.

In that instant, the miasma from the building where bad spirits gathered was swept cleanly away.

The magical power of the pair of sacred swords purified this land.

"Rushalka, that's good enough. Dematerialize!"

Asya proceeded to give orders. Along with the two swords, the blue wyvern vanished.

What attracted evil spirits in Old Manhattan and fire elementals was not only heat but also the spiritual energy of a leviathan. To avoid unnecessary risk, it was essential to end the fight and the summoning in the shortest time possible—This was a job that only the master magi, Asya, could accomplish.

Not only that, Asya was always able to remain calm and composed after a battle, no matter how astounding the combat power she displayed.

(Clearly so confident every time yet so perfect and flawless.)

Hal did not speak out, simply keeping his impressed comment to himself.

Next, he checked his watch. In fact, he had pressed the timer the instant the summoning started. He was only able to do this calmly due to his trust in his childhood friend and Rushalka.

However, Hal cocked his head—Twenty-three seconds. The promised twenty seconds had been slightly exceeded.

For Asya to break a promise regarding battle, one could say this kind of case had never happened before—

"Whatever, it's still within uncertainty, I guess."

Hal shrugged and decided not to bring this up for now.

The search of the former New York branch ended quickly.

Just as heard beforehand, the target item was placed on a table in the underground book depository.

It was the book that Auntie Yulia and Hal's father had acquired at one point in their youth, twenty years ago. Discovered together with the flint, it was a grimoire personally written by the great mage Solomon.

The book title on the cover, written in Greek—*The Posthumous Writings of Progenitor Solomon*.

In modern categorization terms, it would be bigger than A3 size with the book spread open. Thickness was roughly the size of Hal's palm. The internal pages were made of parchment.

Using a cloth to wrap up the heavy ancient text, Hal stored it properly in his backpack.

Although numerous ancient books were lying dormant in this underground library, time was of the essence. Hence, Hal and Asya made the decision to

ignore these books. The two of them exited the library successively and climbed up the staircase.

This room was built deep underground. The antiquated building did not have an elevator.

The two of them could only walk diligently, one step at a time, up the staircase.

The scorching summer heat in the outdoors seemed like a lie. Whether the underground library or these stairs, both were quite cool in temperature.

"Despite its rundown state, it's still a SAURU facility after all," Hal commented poignantly.

"Even though there's clearly no air-conditioning, it doesn't feel humid at all. What an ideal place for storage."

"Since what damages books are humidity, bugs and light... Perhaps the excellent storage environment was preserved only after the electricity was cut and because the building itself is very old."

"After all, it's only in the last half a century that air-conditioning became widespread."

Asya and Hal nodded at each other.

Back in the beginning, they had decided to retrieve the target even if it meant taking a risk, only because they had heard that it was kept in an underground library specialized for ancient texts. Even though the part of the building above ground was blown away along with the salamanders, there was a very high chance that the books kept underground would remain intact.

Finally, they reached the ground floor. After walking out the building, Hal and Asya took a deep breath.

The current time was just after 2pm. They should be able to get back to Brooklyn before sunset.

However—

An unexpected character appeared before Hal's eyes, causing him to gasp and instantly summon his magic gun.

Next to Hal, Asya put on a stance too to enter combat mode. In addition, residing within the magic gun, Hinokagutsuchi went "oh?", making a sound for the first time today.

Under everyone's scrutiny, the *problematic character* raised his right hand lightly and said, "Hello."

An extremely casual greeting. Even a friendly smile surfaced on his face.

If this person was truly whom Hal thought him to be... Instead of raising his gun to aim, Hal used inquiry instead, throwing questions at him.

"...Which newspaper do you usually read? *The New York Times*? Or the *Wall Street Journal*?"

"Both. I also read *USA Today*, just not every day."

The tall red-haired man in the red jacket laughed.

Putting aside the streets of the Upper East Side that had turned into a wasteland, it looked like he was quite familiar with human cities. All things considered, he claimed that he often browsed through three major American newspapers.

"Although it's a bit lowbrow, the NY Daily News is not bad too."

The man's word took Hal aback for a moment. Never expecting the guy to read even tabloids, Hal said with exasperation, "Is this how you studied humans and found out about the governor's election?"

"Studied... Not quite. I simply wander the streets in search for fun, thus coming across all kinds of experiences. Oh right, that reminds me—"

The tall red-haired man continued mischievously.

"My favorite order at the cafe I frequent consists of an espresso, toasted whole-grain wheat bread, with an egg, sunny side up. Add some crispy bacon on top and that's even better."

"Isn't this a lifestyle with higher food standards than mine?"

While Hal was feeling drained by the unexpected admission, Hinokagutsuchi materialized next to him.

Dressed in a scarlet kimono, the young girl smiled malevolently and said to the brawny man in the red jacket, "Still the same as always, Flame Emperor."

"Just call me Hannibal, queen. Actually, I quite like this name."

Finally—The tall man introduced his name.

Red Hannibal. The ruler of the Old Manhattan Concession. Hal could not help but sigh.

Naturally, someone who could strut around fearlessly in the concession territory would not be any ordinary character. Although Hal had guessed that it could be Hannibal's transformation—He would rather himself be wrong!

"...This is my third time meeting a dragon taking human form."

Asya said with nervousness on her face. As a master mage, she had lived many years painfully aware of how terrifying elites and dragon kings could be. Compared to non-combat personnel like Hal, her impressions must be far more poignant.

Meanwhile, Hannibal smiled candidly at the human witch.

"Even for those with knowledge of how to transform, the majority of my kind will not put it into practice. On this aspect, hmm, I am not very particular. I want to be free to go where I want to go and meet whom I want to meet. Hence, on this occasion too—"

The red dragon king looked delightfully at Hal's face.

"I came to have a look because I sensed the nostalgic presence of the twin katana cross star. And the result? Not only do I get to meet the long deceased Crimson Queen again but also the Tyrannos to whom she had entrusted the Bow. Hohohoho, I never thought you would even gain hold of the Twin Katana too..."

"In order to make up for the absolute disadvantage in strength, I have to increase the number of weapons, at least. That's all." Hal shrugged.

"However, it looks like the truly powerful dragons don't think about such stuff."

"Indeed. For a dragon king in possession of sufficient valor, one style of

dragonslaying is enough. By the way, using quantity to make up for lack of strength, that is quite an interesting idea."

Narrowing his eyes as though looking at an exotic toy, Hannibal spoke.

"O Tyrannos of the Bow. You ought to know that I am currently making preparations for the governor's election. If it is agreeable with you, I hope you could lend your aid to those humans."

"Shouldn't you ask me to apply pressure instead of lending aid in this kind of situation?"

"On the contrary. I specifically instigated this incident for the sake of enjoying the truth of 'democracy.'"

The smile on Hannibal's face changed in nature.

The brawny man with the friendly expression naturally turned into a bold warrior.

"If possible, the more obstacles the better. That is how I can fully enjoy myself."

"....."

The so-called elite dragons were hot-blooded battle maniacs for the most part.

However, standing at the summit of dragonkind, Hannibal seemed to stand out differently. Or perhaps ultimately, his true nature still did not escape the norms of dragonkind?

Regardless of the truth, Hal had no room to make a choice.

"Well, since I'm busy with my own trials and career plans, even if you hadn't asked, in the end, it'd probably turn into a situation where I must assist those involved with New York State."

When Hal spoke with a sigh, Hannibal nodded with satisfaction.

...After that, the red dragon king saw Hal and Asya off with a smile while they departed. All the way till Brooklyn, no fire elemental attacked them again.

Presumably, Hannibal had intentionally arranged it that way to allow Hal safe

passage.

If possible, Hal really wanted to return to Tokyo New Town directly and ignore the various troubles in New York State—But most likely, things were not going to go his way.

Chapter 4 - August Rhapsody

Part 1

Hal was sitting cross-legged in a corner with a laptop on his lap. He began a video chat with Luna Francois who was in Japan.

Although this was inside a concession territory, there was reception from the Brooklyn signals, allowing for communications

'...That's the gist of the contract with New York State. I'll send the details to you by email to have a look.'

"Understood. So we ended up working as bodyguards, huh?"

'Indeed. Until the Hannibal issue is resolved, you will advise the Governor of New York as necessary in your capacity as a consultant while providing combat assistance on occasion as well. Well, that pretty much sums it up.'

Yesterday, Hal and his team had received a request from the Governor of New York.

Hal's group was invited to join the Hannibal Countermeasures Committee to handle incidents caused by the red dragon king as well as his declaration. Hal and his witch companions accepted the job and left the negotiation of contract terms to Luna Francois' full discretion—more precisely, the team of lawyers serving as her think tank.

Reporting the results to Hal, Luna smiled cheerfully from the screen and said, 'After all, no other suitable candidate could be found when the enemy is a dragon king. Even if you had stayed in Japan, Harry, we would most likely receive the same request. As for compensation and other terms, they have been handled according to our demands almost verbatim.'

"The financial side needs to be well taken care of too."

'No worries there. I have the connections to bring tax accountants and bankers to the table.'

Luna Francois remained all smiles.

However, her gaze suddenly turned sharp.

'During this period, if you were to do anything "naughty" with Orihime-san, I will say to you "I won't make anymore sacrifices for you unless you lavish upon me triple the love you gave her" in order to force your hand.'

"....."

'If you were to choose Orihime-san instead of me, Harry... I'll simply send you all to the grave by my own hand and destroy everything—That thought has crossed my mind, fufufu.'

"Please don't make that kind of joke with such a radiant smile!"

'Don't be silly, Harry, like anyone would joke around with you. I am 60% serious.'

"60% feels oddly real... Anyway, let's put that aside."

Hal changed the subject slightly forcibly.

"I'm still a bit worried about Asya."

'Huh?'

Luna Francois' reaction was quite unusual. She was stunned.

'Why this sudden concern? Isn't it your policy to let Asya roam the savanna, living according to her wild instincts, while you watch her uninhibited lifestyle with lukewarm eyes!?'

"No, we're just a pair of ordinary childhood friends, neither excessively nor insufficiently familiar."

'Then aren't I right? Neither acquainted to the point of excessive intimacy nor unfamiliar to the point of indifference. Instead, 'lukewarm' in the middle.'

"Hahaha..."

'Oh dear, it is undoubtedly unusual for Asya to lose her appetite. Unbelievable. In any case, Harry, please observe calmly and report to me as soon as you discover anything out of place. I will try my best to find the reason.'

Speaking like a researcher conducting a biological experiment, Luna ended the video chat.

Taking the laptop he had been using for communications, Hal returned it to his bag then looked up into the sky.

"He's here huh..."

The red dragon's majestic form was flying in from the northern sky.

—Two days earlier, Hal had met Hannibal in the Old Manhattan Concession.

Before parting ways, the dragon king had made a request to Hal. He wanted a dialogue in person with the incumbent governor soon, preferably the morning two days later. Hal was permitted to bring the governor to the entrance to New York City.

'You mean Manhattan Bridge?'

'Yes. That was definitely the name of this island's bridge.'

Amazingly, Hannibal had remembered a location name from before Manhattan became a concession territory.

Through SAURU, Hal had conveyed the dragon king's request to the governor, who then agreed without hesitation. Hal thought it was only natural. How could anyone refuse a demand coming from the strongest dragon on earth?

However, what Hal did not expect was the other party's wish for a witness. Hence, Hal had to come along too.

"Now that I think about it more carefully, I have lived in coexistence with all of you in New York for quite some time—"

Having transformed to a human, Hannibal spoke sonorously to begin.

"However, talking like this face to face happens to be the first time. Hohohoho."

The smiling muscular man, standing 190cm tall, seemed to be in a good mood. He was dressed in a red jacket and acted no different from a human.

With a natural expression, Hannibal's attitude could even be described as friendly.

However, the humans opposite from him were extremely nervous with Hal as

the sole exception. All the others were looking at the red dragon king silently with stiff expressions.

This could not be helped either. After all, they had just witnessed a particular scene.

The red dragon king had landed on Manhattan Bridge. His gigantic body suddenly shrank and took on human form—The entire process had been shown to their eyes.

Leading the humans participating in this meeting was the incumbent Governor of New York.

In addition, there was the Mayor of New York, the WotC leader—Christine—representing the military, as well as the governor's aide serving as the witches' commander.

Except for Christine, they were all late middle-aged men in their forties or fifties.

All of them had accomplishments, experience and strong personalities appropriate for such a lineup.

That being said, those people were still stunned and intimidated by Hannibal. Personally witnessing the dragon king's transformation had shocked them with fear and astonishment. Currently, they were cowering, feeling as though they could see the red dragon's shadow behind this well-built man...

To rate the governor and his entourage as "lacking resolve" would be too harsh.

Although Hal was now able to confront dragon kings while maintaining composure, he used to be intimidated even by elites such as Soth, unable to converse with them properly. A dragon king's awe-inspiring presence was incomparable.

Hal decided to take the lead.

"Anyway, let's sit down first. We have prepared seating."

"Yes."

Hannibal nodded in assent and Hal brought him to his seat.

They had moved some classy furniture, a long table and chairs, from a New York City Hall conference room to set up in near the middle of Manhattan Bridge. Due to taking into account the possibility of Hannibal showing up in human form, a seat had been prepared for him too.

Guided by Hal, Hannibal calmly took the seat for the dragon king.

Seats for the governor, the major and his aide were prepared ahead of time. They sat on the opposite side of the table across from Hannibal. Hal originally planned to standby with Christine behind these three VIPs, but— Someone placed his hand on Hal's shoulder. Surprisingly, it was the governor.

(...May I ask what is the matter?)

(...Your seat is here. Sit next to me♪)

(...Huh?)

After whispering in his ear, the governor winked extremely intimately at Hal.

The governor was a handsome man in his early fifties and looked great in a suit. He also had a slim physique, probably because his hobby was playing tennis during weekends. Hal had heard that his father had been Governor of New York too.

A son from an Anglo-Saxon, protestant, political family.

The governor, hailing from a prestigious background as though in a picture book, was making an endearing smile at Hal.

(My job during this meeting should be something like a guard, right?)

(I would like to trouble you with the additional roles of translator and diplomat. You seem to be the most suitable.)

(Governor, demonstrating great leadership at a time like this would be what the populace loves to see...)

Hal responded quietly.

(Like negotiating directly with the leader of the dragons to resolve this situation.)

(Don't worry, there won't be a problem. We did not disclose this meeting to

the media. Neither is it television. The original plan was to leave the actual negotiations to my aide, but I have changed our approach.) The Republican governor spoke lightheartedly

There had been rumors that he might run for the next presidential election. He was apparently the type who left practical business for subordinates and experts to handle with a "I'm counting on you all."

The ability to suddenly change his attitude in the face of a dragon king could be considered leadership aptitude in a certain way.

...At last, flanked by Hal and his aide, the governor faced off against Hannibal.

Watching from the side, Christine smiled with a "heh" look.

Also, this meeting venue was located on Manhattan Bridge spanning across the Hudson River. The National Guard's ground forces and witches were standing by on the Brooklyn shore.

They included the trio of Asya, Orihime and Hazumi as well as the remaining three members of the WotC.

Should an emergency arise, they were probably going to rush over immediately to help.

"Then let us begin."

The job of facilitator naturally fell upon Hal.

"So what do you wish to talk to the governor about?"

"Nothing much. I simply wish to ask him whether he has any intention of yielding his position through *chanrang*."

(...Tell him on my behalf, of course not.)

"Of course not. By the way, there is no system of *chanrang* in democracy."

After listening to Hannibal, Hal exchanged whispers with the governor before conveying the message.

So-called *chanrang* referred to an ancient Chinese practice where the incumbent ruler would abdicate in favor of a successor of no blood relation. Hal spoke while feeling impressed that Hannibal knew this term, but— "Indeed,

there is no such system."

Hannibal responded candidly.

"However, it would be advantageous for the election if the reputable incumbent governor were to endorse the recommended successor—This tendency definitely exists."

"You sure know some weird things for a dragon..."

"Besides, there are numerous exceptions violating the system in your democracy."

"Huh?"

"Choosing a ruler based on popular opinion rather than royal blood or military force, isn't that the basis of democracy? Even so, from what I have heard, the custom of retaining political offices within the family is widespread across the world. It might be quite strange for an outsider like me to say this, but I do believe that would be undemocratic."

"....."

Of all critics, for a king of dragonkind to make an accusation of "undemocratic."

Hal looked to the side. The governor blinked in surprise, pretending he did not hear that. On both sides of his family, whether paternal or maternal, members had apparently served as Members of Congress, mayors, governors, ambassadors, *etc.*

Unfazed by Hal and the others' shock, Hannibal continued, "I heard that in every generation, the citizens of this country all desire powerful rulers. In that case, I don't believe there is any better candidate than me on earth. I intend to become Governor of New York first before running for president."

"Could you stop stepping up like a human politician?"

Entering the White House via New York was an ideal route to becoming president.

Seeing Hannibal so well-versed in human culture, Hal retorted, feeling utterly drained.

On further thought, Hinokagutsuchi had also mastered handheld games and chess through self-study, making them her hobbies. With her as an example, there was nothing unbelievable about Hannibal.

"Besides, what kind of policy do you intend to push once you're governor or president?"

"Good question. Actually, this is one of the reasons why I have summoned you all here. Please convey to the media the platform I am about to announce. Also, this is not a request."



Not a request—In other words, an order. Hannibal smiled proudly. Spontaneously, his expression had turned from that of a friendly muscular guy

to that of a ferocious conqueror.

"I... intend to lead the United States of America to war. I will cross the ocean to attack the land of Europe, winning victory and conquest as I please."

"!?"

"I will then proceed to take the opportunity to defeat my ally and longtime rival who resides over there—the Black Lightning Emperor."

The Black Lightning Emperor. A dragon king living reclusively in the Old Warsaw Concession.

Unlike Red Hannibal, the Black Lightning Emperor rarely showed himself. Roughly twenty years ago, he only appeared on three occasions in the Mediterranean, central Europe and the coast of the Black Sea respectively.

In Europe, he was the king of dragons extolling destruction, their leader.

"Of course, I could simply lead the Jabones—the winged lizards you know—and my minions to battle, but that would be too boring."

Everyone present looked at Hannibal blankly.

But being the spokesman, it was not acceptable for Hal to remain silent, so he conversed with the dragon king on his own.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing special. I simply wish for a more challenging fight."

Hannibal boasted proudly.

"I will lead a weak army from a weak country to declare war on a powerful empire of dragons and conquer it. That would entail a battlefield where victory is not guaranteed in spite of my mighty strength and military leadership. However, that is precisely what I desire. Compared to easy victories, I look more forward to arduous defeats!"

"A-Are you trying to play SLGs using the real world...?"

SLG was the abbreviation for simulation games where players employed strategy to build up their countries while annexing territory from enemy nations.

One could enjoy a relatively easy game by choosing a stronger nation in the beginning stage. However, it was possible to indulge in the joys of a challenging game by intentionally choosing the weakest nation to lead soldiers of poor morale— In fact, Hal did not dislike methods of gameplay with additional constraints imposed.

He liked SLGs quite a bit. However, he felt compelled to refute the dragon king this time.

"I doubt anyone would cast their vote for a dragon that jumps out suddenly with this kind of platform."

"I have already considered that. In fact, I intend to destroy all weapons and military hardware on America's eastern coast during the election."

"....."

"To the populace that fears the winged lizards, I will tell them 'Gather under my banner, that of the strongest conqueror, and become my people.' If I enter a democratic election under such conditions, I believe there will surely be voters turning out in admiration of me, right?"

Sharing his idea that was too crude to be called a plan, Hannibal grinned.

"Nothing serious. Even if there is a temporary loss of property and weaponry, they can be robbed from elsewhere. All the people need to do is invade neighboring states or countries and plunder what they need."

"Sure enough, you hail from a warring tribe huh... This idea is quite barbaric."

The Huns, the Turks, the Scythians, the Mongols, Germanic tribes, the Vikings, *etc.*

Hal recalled many famous militant tribes in history. In fact, Hannibal's idea was a warfare model familiar to mankind since antiquity. These particular groups were especially talented at it. Even at the dawn of modern society, many armies would still rely on "local sources" to replenish supplies.

However, Hal reached a poignant conclusion.

Ultimately, Red Hannibal was a "noble savage."

He possessed outstanding intellect and perceptiveness. Despite being a

dragon, he also commanded human charisma. He understood civilization and potentially enjoyed it.

However, he was a savage driven by primal senses through and through. This would never change.

Despite following the customs of civilized society, Hannibal still remained an unaffected noble savage—

"The people would probably ridicule and ignore this idea if it weren't suggested by a great dragon king..."

What a savage idea, simple to the point of being ludicrous.

However, there was a certain level of logic to it. Precisely because of this plan's simplicity, so long as one set it into motion and possessed power beyond the parameters of common sense, it felt like it might go surprisingly smoothly...

In front of the sighing Hal, Hannibal smiled mischievously.

"To be frank, I do not know if things will proceed according to my wishes. I will not know unless I try. No time to lose, let us start tomorrow. Send my regards to the residents of the state too."

(...Hey you! Negotiate more with him! At least buy us some time!)

"Oh, uh—"

The dragon king spoke casually as though he were simply pressing the start button on a game console. Hearing that, the governor panicked.

One could hardly blame him. If Hannibal were to put his plan into motion, it would imply attacking military facilities across the eastern seaboard. It was only natural for the governor to hope for a few day's delay. Stuck in the middle, Hal scratched his head.

"Before that, why don't we hold a referendum?"

"Oh? A referendum?"

"Yeah. Let's ask if the residents approve of a great dragon king running in the election without US citizenship, let alone membership in the human race. Let's collect the opinions from the true stars of democracy—the people themselves."

Part 2

"That's amazing... All the television channels are reporting about Hannibal-san."

"It seems like half the pages on newspapers are covering the story. It's really turned into a huge commotion..."

Hazumi and Orihime widened their eyes, thoroughly amazed.

At SAURU's New York branch, located in the neighborhood of Bedford at Brooklyn, Hal and his friends were having coffee in a lounge.

The room was furnished to resemble the style of an ordinary family's living room with sofas and a low table.

In front of them was a forty-two-inch flatscreen television, currently showing the evening news.

There was detailed coverage of Hannibal's "attack" over the past few days as well as a special program about his "aspirations and policy plan as a governor candidate" which he wanted conveyed to the residents of New York State.

Two days had passed since the meeting on Manhattan Bridge.

"B-But is it really okay to release such important news?"

"Had this happened in Japan, I don't think they would publicize this sort of information."

"If confidentiality were possible, of course nondisclosure would attract less trouble."

Hal was sitting in the sofa opposite to the two baffled witches.

Incidentally, they were casting questioning gazes at the person sitting next to Hal.

But although Hazumi was smiling like an angel as usual, Orihime seemed a bit unsettled with her entire body having trouble sitting still. Sensing awkwardness

in the air, Hal continued, "There wasn't a choice this time. After all, the dragon king who provided the information is a loyal reader of various news publications. He's going to check whether the human side had released the news for real."

On the table were seven different newspapers from today.

Both national and regional newspapers had uniformly used "Hannibal News" as their headline matter-of-factly. Apart from that, the *referendum* to be held four days later also took up a lot of coverage.

Do you approve of Hannibal's candidacy in the election as a dragon?

A referendum was to be held to pose this question to the residents of New York State.

"However, the conversation leading to the suggestion of a referendum was very interesting."

The one who brought this up sonorously was Christine Hulk.

She had arrived at the branch twenty minutes earlier to see Haruga Haruomi and as soon as she stepped into this lounge, she planted herself onto the sofa where Hal was sitting, instantly staking out her territory.

With only ten centimeters between the two of them, it was far too close.

Staring at those two, Orihime's gaze looked very sad—Hal felt as though he were sitting on a bed of pins.

On the other hand, Christine spoke innocently without any regard for Hal's feelings, "When Hal calmly pointed out that a dragon without American citizenship won't be recognized as having the right to stand in elections, Hannibal snickered and replied that even immigrants should have a way to obtain permanent residency and citizenship rights. Hence, the two of them came to mutual agreement to hold a referendum to clear up the issue beyond a doubt."

"Rather than mutual agreement, it was more like playing a game."

Christine giggled and next to her, Hal shrugged.

"Whether saying he was going to run for president or lead America to war,

Hannibal was totally like playing a game. His mindset is pretty much like playing an SLG with Earth as the stage. That's why I played along and suggested a 'voting game,' that's all."

It was purely good fortune that Hannibal was interested. Regardless, the two sides had reached consensus to hold an impromptu referendum in a few days' time, thus the objective of buying time at the current stage succeeded.

At this moment, they were making all sorts of preparations for what would come *after the referendum*.

As a side note, running for the American presidency not only required citizenship but the condition of *being born on American soil*. Naturally, Hannibal could not possibly fulfill this.

But in Hannibal's case, he was not even human. Hal had generously overlooked this detail.

"Well, you should be thanking Hannibal's playfulness rather than me."

"What are you talking about? We—including the governor—were only sitting there watching like scarecrows. This is really your accomplishment, Hal. Nothing less expected from you, Hal!"

"!? Y-You're too close, Chris!"

Christine suddenly hugged Hal, wrapping her arms around his neck.

This intimate act was going a bit overboard. Christine's abrupt body language rendered Hazumi speechless. Then Hal suddenly heard a "klonk."

Orihime accidentally dropped her coffee cup just as she was about to take a sip.

Fortunately, the cup did not break and there was only a little bit of the black liquid remaining.

"M-My apologies! My hand slipped!"

"Nee-sama, are you okay!?"

Orihime knelt down to wipe the spilt coffee on the ground.

Hazumi and Hal also took out tissues to help. While the three of them were

bent over to clean up the spill, Hal happened to meet Orihime's gaze.

Always lively and cheerful, she was displaying an expression that Hal had never seen before.

Orihime was looking at Haruga Haruomi worriedly. Then suddenly regaining her senses, she looked down sadly. Hal could not help but feel an urge to escape out of this place.

Just as he was about to follow his impulse to take Orihime outside to talk, just the two of them...

Christine, witnessing the whole scene in a laid back manner—

"...Don't tell me you're actually very popular, Hal?"

"Huh?"

Another bomb exploded.

"All the girls in the same team are intimate with you, living a fulfilling love life and working life every day—Something along those lines? It turns out you're actually unexpectedly capable. The first time I saw your photo, Hal, I thought you were an eccentric boy who likes to be alone... Fufu, I've discovered a surprising side to you, Hal."

"D-Don't just fabricate my personality on your own."

"R-Right! Haruga-kun isn't the kind of character that would appear in American dramas. He and I have yet to—"

Hal instantly retorted and Orihime shouted immediately—

Indeed. Juujouji Orihime suddenly came to a realization when she said the words "yet to" and hastily covered her mouth with her hands. Seeing this scene, Christine grinned like the Cheshire Cat and said, "'Yet to'? So you haven't started going out officially... Is my understanding correct?"

"@△※×□!?"

"So there's no problem even if I express my affection for Hal, right? Then let me ask him out to dinner for tonight."

"@△※×□@△※×□!?"

"N-Nee-sama!?"

With every sentence Christine spoke, Orihime widened her eyes.

Not only that, but she also showed a panicking and extremely confused look, her mouth opening and closing alternately. Hazumi hastily came to her side and tried to calm her cousin.

Speaking of which, Hal's classmate was not only a school idol but quite a jumpy person too.

Hal was just about to speak on Orihime's behalf when—

"H-Hold on. I—"

"Unfortunately, Haruomi already has plans. Tonight, he is coming with me to decipher the ancient text we retrieved a few days ago."

The one who interrupted was Hal's childhood friend.

Asya happened to open the door and enter the lounge. She was holding just a cup of coffee that was ostensibly brewed in the pantry without bringing any donuts or cake as a snack.

"This job requires Level 4 magical power at least. If you happen to meet this requirement, Miss Christine, I would implore you to lend your assistance... What do you say?"

"Sorry, but I'm only Level 3."

Christine extended her right hand to Asya who had suddenly interrupted.

"This is actually our first time talking face to face. You are the master-class witch, Miss Anastasya Rubashvili, aren't you? Just call me Chris."

"Nice to meet you too. It's also fine for you to call me Asya."

Asya shook her hand and Christine smiled cheerfully.

"You seem completely different from the rumors."

"Me? What kind of rumors are circulating about me?"

"They're quite mean, saying you're a beast and living proof of wildness, completely unable to settle down outside of battlefields. It looks like they're

totally off base."

"Seriously, they keep making these weird jokes, it's quite troubling."

Smiling calmly, Asya conversed amicably with the witch from the East Coast.

Thus, she managed to sweep the earlier commotion under the rug. Seeing his childhood friend like this, Hal was struck deeply again—Sure enough, Asya was behaving different from usual.

She was even calmer than usual and very adept at handling people.

What on earth had happened to her?

"So, I'd like you to come clean with the truth quickly."

"You're suddenly talking nonsense, Haruomi..."

Two hours later, Hal and Asya were alone in a hotel room.

On the table in Hal's room was *The Posthumous Writings of Progenitor Solomon*.

A heavy grimoire two sizes larger than A3. A steel-colored weapon—Hal's magic gun—had been placed on top of this mysterious book.

What Hal was making effective use of right now was his gun's power as a "magic wand" rather than its functionality as a firearm.

"Before accusing me of alleged crimes in my innocence, please report what transpired first."

"Well, sure... This gun is simultaneously my personal 'magic wand.' I'm currently asking it and Hinokagutsuchi to decipher the book," Hal explained to Asya who was showing a cold expression.

"Even if SAURU's research team tried to decipher it using conventional methods, they'd still get deceived by the obfuscation magic on this book. It could take them a decade to dig out the true content. Then it might take them another twenty years to decipher the text they finally obtained after so much trouble."

"How many years will it take Hinokagutsuchi-san to decipher it?"

"She said no more than five days."

"Meaning there's a pretty good chance we might make it before the referendum is held? Nothing less expected from a former dragon king and a magic item of Ruruk Soun. It's like cheating."

The deciphering had started the previous night.

As the guardian residing in the magic gun, Hinokagutsuchi had not appeared since then. Hal wanted her to focus all her spiritual energy towards the task and did not take the magic gun out of the hotel room.

A situation requiring a weapon probably should not arise in the short run for now—

Hal had taken action precisely to take advantage of this. Starting since the previous night, he had strictly forbidden hotel staff from entering this room. Consequently, the room was a mess inside.

"That's pretty much the idea, so you don't really need to go out of your way to help, Asya."

"Of course I know that. It was simply an improvised plan to get Chris to leave."

"....."

"Jeez, it is quite regrettable that an unmotivated guy like you, Haruomi, the type that goes 'sigh, no helping it,' has suddenly turned into a hot stock. A phase of sudden popularity should descend on more carnivorous guys who work hard at attracting girls."

Asya shrugged and offered a highly critical opinion.

"Looks like this world is lacking in fairness and justice."

"I-I think all Chris wanted to do was casually tease me a bit. Think about it, it's quite a rare occasion since it's the first time for someone like me to appear in the modern era."

"I recall Hinokagutsuchi-san saying before that you're a second Solomon, reborn in modern times."

The childhood friend spoke in a sarcastic tone, "Why don't you try to imitate him and marry seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines?"

"Isn't that a story made up in the Old Testament of the Bible? Like hell anyone's gonna believe that! Besides, it's impossible for me to resemble King Solomon in any way."

"Even when you snagged two American girls, Luna and Chris, in such short time?"

"P-Perhaps I just happen to get along well with American girls, hahaha..."

"Please quit saying this sort of nonsense. Isn't there a suspicious atmosphere hanging over you and Orihime-san too?"

"—!?"

Hal was shocked by Asya's accurate comment.

It was possible that he felt something for the girl known as Juujouji Orihime— But he never expected Asya to be the one to point this out.

In matters on this front, his childhood friend was supposed to be even denser than Hal.

Then why was it Asya's turn to talk about him? Just as Hal panicked, Asya continued with her attack.

"Haruomi, you're really a troubling guy with no fidelity. And Luna even caught you unprepared and kissed you on the lips... Isn't that why you became overly conscious of Luna, preventing you from taking a decisive stand against her?"

"How could I possibly take a decisive stand against her? Luna is one of my comrades, also—"

"Also, you're wavering because of her aggressive courtship, aren't you?"

"....."

Asya swiftly came to Hal's side. Not knowing his childhood friend's intent, Hal tilted his head with a "?". In the next instant, Asya brought her lips near Hal's face in an extremely natural manner— Then she kissed him. She kissed Hal right on the lips.

"Huh?"

"This is why Luna and Chris have you eating out of their palm. You need to reflect properly."

"Huh?"

"Well then, goodnight, Haruomi. Even if you dream of me and revel in shameless and immoral delusions... I will permit it this once as a special exception for tonight."

"....."

"Despite how I may look, I am your magnanimous and open-minded childhood friend. So see you tomorrow."

Leaving these words behind, Asya left the room.

Hal remained stunned for quite a while after that. His thoughts halted for ten minutes or so. Then finally returning to normal, his myriad thoughts began to spin furiously in his mind.

Why on earth did that Asya ki... do that to me?

In addition, his heart had been pounding the whole time, beating like mad nonstop. How odd.

"W-What am I supposed to do now!?"

In a certain way, this was a challenge of a lifetime, even trickier than fighting against dragon kings.

Forced to confront this all at once, Hal was plunged into extreme trepidation.



Part 3

"How's this, President!? I can do it too when I put my mind to it!"

Just as how Haruomi would chat with Luna Francois once a day, Asya also reported the situation daily to a certain person—President M in Tokyo New Town.

Back to her hotel room, Asya was chatting with the president through her laptop.

"I delivered the critical strike tonight. Haruomi must be in a state of 'nonstop pounding in his heart ☆' with his thoughts all occupied with me, I'm certain of it!"

'I-I can't believe a loser like you were able to get this far...'

President M looked shocked on the laptop's LCD screen.

'I never expected you could bring about such a dramatic change through autosuggestion. This world is unbelievable.'

"Although I call it autosuggestion, it is systematic hypnosis magic after all. The unprecedented effect was produced by combining my magical power with my serious determination to apply hypnosis at full strength."

That night while they were touring Boston—

Asya had cast the magic of Hypnotic Suggestion on herself. She had told herself "to take care of the prey calmly and assuredly by any means necessary."

Asya went "ehem" proudly and puffed out her flat chest.

"I was inspired by my mother. Back when I was in elementary school, my mother taught me the ways of hunting and how to use air guns, but I failed to catch any prey no matter how I tried."

'So in your family, even your mother is a military nut...'

"Back then, my mother told me 'the key is to stay calm until the moment

when the prey's throat is severed.'"

Asya recalled her mother's teachings.

"Be cool. You will regret impatience in front of prey. Pull the trigger twice. Recalling many iron-clad rules, I came to understand that they can be applied effectively in love, so I enacted this comeback performance!"

'Well, the romance methods of popular carnivorous girls definitely bear a resemblance to hunting, but—'

President M sighed.

'I am at a loss, overcome with emotion, to think that you managed to do the same.'

"It's all thanks to your teachings, President. All this time, I've been tormented by my inability to put into practice the content from your special training... But even so, it seems like the content was etched subconsciously into my mind, becoming a part of my flesh and blood."

Asya grinned nihilistically.

"While my autosuggestion was active, I was able to employ the various popularity techniques I learned as naturally as breathing. I could even go beyond what was taught every now and then."

'That has already surpassed technique to reach the realm of wild hunting instincts...'

Sensing instinctively the presence of a girl approaching Haruomi then naturally hindering her.

Clever image manipulation to make him suddenly think of Asya.

Then there was the surprise attack launched with precision tonight to catch Haruomi unprepared. These setups were essential for transforming herself from an ordinary childhood friend to a prospective romantic partner.

...All of them were beyond Asya's ability in the past.

"I'll concede that Luna and Orihime-san are ahead of me currently, but the situation is still salvageable. That being said, it would be too rash to expect a

reversal from a single strike..."

Asya calmly explained the approach she should take.

"Right now, I need to humbly admit my position as a minor player then make careful preparations repeatedly for battle. I have to be ready at all times to launch a blitzkrieg the instant a good opportunity presents itself."

'You are now capable of formulating strategies to make yourself popular!?'

"To be honest, the way I am now, I don't think that any boy will remain safe if I were to set my eyes on him."

Neither conceited nor bragging, Asya simply stated indifferently.

Asya was currently like a master general who remained calm at all times, concealing the battle spirit within. A sniper capable of enduring all manner of hardship until the target was struck.

However, President M said to this kind of student, 'Your dramatic level up is truly a joy to behold, but... How is *that* going?'

"Huh? What do you mean by *that*?"

'Loss of appetite. After applying the hypnosis, you totally stopped eating, right?'

"Oh, nothing's changed, but I don't think there's anything to worry about. I don't feel unwell and I'm still in good health."

'Honest?'

"....."

Impressive as always, President M, the self-proclaimed "mother of all club members," was extremely observant.

Asya tried to respond in as cheerful a voice as possible, but the president spoke faster than her.

'Well, a secret technique to turn an unwanted loser girl into a warrior of love in a single night can't possibly not have risks. You must have noticed something no matter how faint, haven't you?'

"T-To be honest, I don't have a clue..."

'Then you are fortunate. Regardless, you have succeeded in evading a 'Game Over' crisis, so why don't you take this chance to dispel this boosted state? Do not be too greedy.'

"....."

'Then it's settled. If anything comes up, don't be shy, just call me. However, do not call when it's late at night in Japan. Staying up is bad for skin health.'

"Y-You're actually concerned about beauty care!?"

After revealing a shocking truth, President M hung up.

Asya switched off her laptop as well. This Japanese-made B5 notebook was a mass production model sold on the market but had amazing durability and battery life. It never had any data loss and remained virtually undamaged despite minor falls to the ground.

Military personnel often used this laptop on the battlefield due to these characteristics.

Switched off and displaying nothing, this approximately two-year-old laptop's shiny black LCD screen reflected Asya's face.

Seeing her own familiar face, Asya began to think back.

During that battle in the Old Manhattan Concession, Asya had promised to get rid of the enemy within twenty seconds but ended up going slightly over time. This inaccuracy had never happened to her before.

Asya did not think that it would pose an immediate problem today or tomorrow.

However, were it several weeks or even months later instead, perhaps—

Part 4

The referendum was to be held on August 16th.

Hal expected to remain in New York until after this event and the Hannibal problem had settled to a certain extent. If the situation were to show signs of becoming long-term, he would have Orihime and Hazumi, the two Tokyo New Town witches, return to Japan first...

A number of days had passed since he decided that.

The date on the calendar showed August 15th. The referendum was going to be tomorrow. That evening, Hal and Hazumi went out on a drive to go shopping.

"Excuse me, Senpai. May I ask you to explain something to me?"

They were on their way back after buying a large amount of daily necessities and snacks.

The car was driving along a street in Brooklyn. Sitting in the front passenger seat, Hazumi had her head tilted. She happened to be watching the evening news on the car navigator screen.

"This current story is reporting about the results from the street survey asking if people approve of Hannibal-san's candidacy where they answer YES or NO, isn't it?"

"Yeah, that's right."

Since Hazumi had said she wanted to practice her English listening skills, Hal turned on the news for her to watch in the car.

When Hal nodded, the serious learner and junior student said in puzzlement, "The result was that 78% of New York City residents answered NO, 6% answered YES and 16% had no comment... Did I get that right?"

"Don't worry, you didn't make any mistakes."

"In other words, more than 20% did not answer NO... I am a bit surprised. There is a chance that Hannibal-san might become governor as a dragon."

"This kind of result is possible when you go around asking an indeterminate number of people."

With one hand on the steering wheel, Hal replied to Hazumi.

The sun was setting upon the streets of Brooklyn. Although not to the point of congestion, traffic volume was still quite high. Normally, residents would slowly move out of a major metropolis if it became as close to a dragon concession territory as New York City, resulting in a problem of underpopulation.

Tokyo New Town was a very good example, but New York City was one of the rare exceptions.

Perhaps it was due to the presence of dragon king Hannibal ended up deterring Raptor attacks—along with the vibrancy of the inhabitants and the city itself.

"In fact, there's a new religion in America that worships Hannibal as a New Age god."

"Ehhhh!?"

"The rest is just as Hannibal said himself. He's undoubtedly the most powerful leader in the twenty-first century... I guess? He's able to attract people who are outcasts in the economy or society."

"I-Is that how it works!?"

"No, I just made up the last part. Many social psychologists with famous TV personas on news programs will be analyzing this issue. I'm expecting something will be out tonight."

"Oh, then I will watch from my hotel room."

Hazumi seemed to be seriously trying to improve her English level. Seeing the junior student raise her clasped hands slightly while saying "I will try my hardest," Hal felt a gradual soothing of his soul.

Incidentally, one of the special powers of witches was aptitude for language learning.

They were capable of familiarizing with foreign languages with exceptional speed, reaching mother tongue proficiency within a month or two. After arriving in America, Hazumi and Orihime's English had been improving day by day.

However, the junior suddenly began to hesitate and spoke shyly, "B-By the way, Senpai... I'd like to ask a question but it's difficult to bring up."

"What is it? If it's you, Shirasaka, I can make a special exception and disclose my three sizes."

"Th-Then I shall proceed. A-After that time, what did it feel like when you went on a date with Chris-san!?"

"A date!?"

Hal jumped in surprise and said hastily, "No no no, we're not dating at all!"

"S-Sorry for asking so suddenly. It's been bothering me ever since that day, but I couldn't bring myself to ask..."

Three days ago, Christine had come to ask Hal out and hugged him.

After that, Hazumi and Orihime had acted as usual in Hal's presence. However, Hal realized there was something unnatural in their attitude if he thought about it carefully. This seemed to be the reason.

"H-However, I am relieved. I will let Nee-sama know when I get back."

Hazumi smiled, looking like a 100% pure angel.

She never considered the possibility of an unscrupulous senior lying to her. Soothed by Hazumi's purity once again, Hal asked apprehensively, "Could it be that Juujouji is also bothered by this?"

"Nee-sama didn't say explicitly, but I'm guessing yes. For the past few days, she has seemed distracted... But I understand, because it was the same for me."

"Huh?"

Sitting in the front passenger seat next to Hal, Hazumi bowed her head sadly.

"Senpai might be dating a certain girl... It feels very painful here whenever this thought crosses my mind, although I have no idea why."

With a soul purer than anyone's, she held her hand on her chest lightly.

Pain in the heart. Meaning—Jealousy? Hal could not help but feel moved while accidentally entertaining delusions about this sort of thing.

"You're feeling jealousy when girls approach me. In other words, this is the sense of loss stemming from your perception of me as something beyond a senior—an older guy akin to an *big brother*!"

"I-I am treating you as my brother, Senpai!?"

"In other words, Shirasaka, you have a brother complex!"

"I see now!"

"Yeah, so feel free to call me 'Onii-chan'—No no. I shouldn't do this. I almost got ahead of myself."

Hal decided to behave. Although a fake brother-sister relationship had its charms, the bittersweetness of an immature senior-junior relationship was also hard to give up. He should not lose control from momentary impulse.

"Well, thinking about it carefully, perhaps it's the feeling of uncertainty from 'the possibility of someone by your side leaving you...' that's making your delicate soul stress out, Shirasaka. It must be something like that."

"Is... that really it?"

"It isn't?"

"Oh, but actually, I'm starting to accept it. If you were my older brother, Senpai, I would definitely feel overjoyed from the bottom of my heart..."

"—!"

Hal cursed the fact that he was driving at the moment. Were he not driving, he could go along with this wave of emotion and perform two or three somersaults, allowing his excitement to explode.

"Perhaps it's the same for Asya-san."

"Huh?"

"Because it feels like Asya-san and you have been quite distant from each other lately. She probably feels the same as me."

"....."

The truth was something else. It was Hal who was avoiding Asya.

Indeed. Ever since three days ago, after his childhood friend had done *that* to him, Hal had found it impossible to keep his emotions in check.

Whenever he saw Asya, Hal would inevitably think back to that and unable to calm his mind. Hence, Hal would naturally distance himself from his childhood friend when in the same space, to avoid speaking to her face-to-face as much as possible.

This had never happened before even though their inseparable relationship had lasted ten-odd years!

"Oh, how should I put it, that Asya—"

Just as Hal spoke up, he suddenly felt a pain on his right hand.

Using only his left hand to hold the steering wheel, Hal opened his right hand—The Rune of the Bow surfaced on the center of his palm. Next, Hal noticed.

"Hinokagutsuchi is calling me..."

Done. The deciphering of the grimoire, *The Posthumous Writings of Progenitor Solomon*—

Several hours passed after the drive with Hazumi.

Hal's original plan for the night was to stay cooped up in his room the whole time, but—

"Excuse me for visiting so suddenly. It's because I wanted to discuss a few things with you, Haruga-kun..."

"No problem. It just so happens that I'm reporting my findings to Luna too."

Orihime paid a sudden visit.

Hal invited the worried-looking Orihime into his room and sat down at the desk again. The open laptop's screen was displaying Luna Francois' face. Hal was using an internet connection and a webcam to contact Japan. With great interest, Luna said, 'Then Harry, what was recorded in Solomon-senpai's

grimoire?'

"As it turns out, the content is quite exciting."

The magic gun and Hinokagutsuchi had been in charge of deciphering the grimoire. The instant Hal returned to the hotel room and picked up the gun, the grimoire's contents flowed into his mind.

Hal had already told Hazumi, Orihime and Asya the gist of the contents.

During that time, Asya had listened calmly to Hal, infuriating him. At the time, he was thinking "you suddenly did *that* last time, spinning me in circles."

In any case, Hal started to convey to Luna the key points in *The Posthumous Writings of Progenitor Solomon*.

"Solomon-senpai was in the same situation as me. He was also a human wielding the power of dragonbane—"

He had actually used numerous incantations, mystic techniques and rituals.

Also, during the process of using the power of dragonbane, he had obtained dragonkind's knowledge. Knowledge regarding the runes of Ruruk Soun. In addition, there were the terms of the covenants between Solomon and the seventy-two apostles serving him...

That was the message recorded in the book's introduction.

—To my disciples or descendants living in the future world, you ought to inherit my rune and seventy-two apostles after mastering the wisdom in this book. You are Solomon's successors— 'Wow—definitely quite an exciting will.'

"'My rune' probably refers to the dragonslaying power Solomon used. The seventy-two apostles would presumably be the ancient leviathans he synthesized, I'm pretty sure."

Luna Francois smiled suggestively while Orihime looked at Hal uneasily.

In front of the two girls, Hal continued, "The final chapter, which was the hardest to decipher, left an incantation for ordering the genie of the lamp to bring the hidden treasure chest. Naturally, what lies inside the chest would be Solomon-senpai's legacy."

'How considerate. It must be fate that chose Harry as Solomon's successor.'

"I feel a little inclined to agree. So Luna, what are your honest thoughts?"

'If such a message were found written on an ancient text that took monumental effort to decipher, I might go accept the legacy with elation. However, this was translated easily just like that, which invites calm thinking. As a person who is not only calm but also very twisted, I think—'

On the thirteen-inch LCD screen, Luna winked mischievously.

'Too suspicious, forget about it this time♪ That's what I believe to be the correct answer.'

"I actually agree. 'Don't naively believe in a map that shows the shortest route to the treasure' is how treasure hunters roll."

'Traps should be placed in front of the treasure vault as well as along the return path when adventurers have lowered their guard.'

"E-Excuse me, Haruga-kun and Luna-san."

At that moment, Orihime interjected apprehensively. She was thinking for Hal's sake.

"Having lived so long ago, Solomon-san intentionally wrote in a simple and easily understood manner for the sake of imparting important information to future generations... Does this possibility not exist?"

"However, since he apparently maintained human form, his powers were even greater than mine."

Hal spoke quietly.

"Would he be that friendly? There's also Pavel Galad as a precedent. That kind of upfront personality even as a dragon, it's like playing a super high-difficulty game that delivers a sense of setback halfway through."

'King Solomon was probably the same as Harry and I. Calculative and twisted,' Luna said jokingly. However, her tone of voice then turned serious.

'However... Harry, don't tell me you intend to open the treasure chest?'

"I'm sorry to say that I'd like to give it a try. Would this timing be considered

excellent or poor...? If the Hannibal problem didn't exist, I'd shelve this issue without hesitation."

'Yes... In your current condition, if by any chance a fight with Hannibal comes up—'

"Going all-out shouldn't be a problem, but I don't have a high chance of winning. Since losing is the likely outcome, I might as well take a gamble before that. Let me be the human sacrifice to challenge Solomon's treasure."

Hal did not want to talk about this sort of thing with such a sense of despair.

Shrugging, he spoke as frivolously as possible.

He had already informed his plan to his other companions other than Luna, which was why Orihime was very worried. She was worried about the reckless Haruga Haruomi who wanted to make a move on Solomon's legacy despite knowing the risks...

"It's also possible that Solomon-senpai is a good person like Juujouji said."

'—Ahh, my goodness!'

Luna Francois suddenly yelled in chagrin.

Hal and Orihime looked at the laptop simultaneously. The blonde girl who had stayed back in Tokyo said with frustration, 'Why did I ever agree to hold the fort, Harry!? Were I by your side this moment, I would undoubtedly cross the line with you without hesitation to develop an even more intimate relationship!'

"Huh?" "L-Luna-san!?"

In front of the speechless Hal and Orihime, Luna continued, 'Harry might end up like a candle in the wind as a result of taking on a dangerous challenge, you know? In that case, we should finish up what needs to be done between a man and a woman! It might turn out to be a final memory!'

"Th-That's too extreme an opinion, Luna—"

'Are you saying you don't care, Harry!? You don't care about developing that sort of relationship with me even in the face of a potentially deadly climax!? This is your best chance to satisfy a boy's worldly desire, you know!?"

"Well, I'd be lying if I said I didn't want it..."

"H-Haruga-kun!?"

"Oh, uh, don't get the wrong idea, Juujouji. Umm... Think about it, I only answered like this because Luna isn't here in New York...!"

'This is so frustrating! If I were over there right now, I could seduce you with everything I've got and see how far I'd depending on luck and atmosphere... But Harry, we still have more chances, you know?'

"Chances?"

'Yes. When you return to Japan safely, Harry, I will—'

"L-L-L-L-Luna-san!? I-I believe such words should not be spoken too loudly!"

'And I've discovered this. If anything, Harry likes Orihime-san slightly more than me.'

Hal and Orihime jumped in surprise at Luna's comment.

In contrast, the blonde witch who had pointed this out added nonchalantly, 'It's time for me to bring out my trump card to catch up with Orihime-san. Listen up, Harry, know that Luna Francois Gregory is a girl who can do anything for you. You must return safe and sound, got that? It's a promise, okay?'

"A-Anything!?"

'Yes. Even though you are a closet pervert, Harry, I will humor your every wish and desire.'

Hal's call to Japan conclude at this point.

What did that girl Luna promise me?—Despite his great shock, Hal kept his expression tense. Orihime was next to him too. Right now, he had to maintain a resolute attitude.

However, the girl with the delicate relationship with Haruga Haruomi was currently glaring at him with eyes of resentment.

"Haruga-kun... Lust is written all over your face."

"A-Absolutely not. Hmm."

Totally unconvincing, thought Hal to himself. Naturally, Orihime did not believe him.

"Good grief! When you act like this, Haruga-kun, aren't you forcing me to wonder whether I should be doing something too!?"

"Huh? You feel that way towards me too, Juujouji?"

The instant Hal muttered that, the jumpy school idol suddenly came to a realization.

"Umm, uh, I misspoke just now in a moment of panic. My apologies."

"Y-Yeah. I thought so."

"No, but, how should I put this? I do admit that thoughts along the lines of 'I don't want to lose to Luna-san' exist in a corner of my mind..."

"Juujouji..."

The two of them naturally drew closer—At that very moment...

Knock knock. Someone suddenly knocked at the door. Then a voice spoke from outside.

"Haruomi. Please open up if you're there. I need to speak to you."

"Asya!?"

"The ritual for inheriting Solomon's legacy... I want to be present for it. We're carrying it out tonight, aren't we?"

Then twenty minutes passed.

Taking Asya and Orihime, Hal went to the hotel's roof.

The roof was not open to hotel guests. Hal and friends had entered through a staff access point without permission. To carry out the *ritual*, Hal wanted to be outdoors and somewhere out of sight.

"Let's start."

The magic gun manifested in Hal's right hand. The two witches watched from the side. Orihime was observing Hal with concern. On the other hand, Asya had

her arms crossed with a calm expression.

Damn it. Hal secretly cursed in his heart.

Asya had been like this all the time lately, acting as though *that* had never happened, putting Hal's mind in disarray.

What the heck is Asya thinking? How does she feel about me?

"...Thinking about it is futile."

Hal muttered in a voice too quiet for the girls to hear, then switched his focus.

For the past few days, his childhood friend had shown many puzzling behaviors. However, he would leave the mystery to be solved after handling his pile of work and requests. He needed to prioritize the matters at hand. Hal also decided to temporarily set aside his relationship with Orihime, who was becoming much more than a classmate or a friend— He released magical power from his heart and transmitted it to the magic gun in his right hand.

Hal pointed the muzzle at the sky and focused his mind. He placed his finger on the trigger.

"I suppose the magic phrase is 'open sesame,'... right?"

A classic incantation for opening a treasure vault's door.

Hal recited the incantation associated with the story of Ali Baba and invoked Legacy Succession magic. It was a mystic technique he had learned from Solomon's posthumous writings.

Seven runes of Ruruk Soun appeared in front of the gun's muzzle that was pointing at the sky.

They signified "My disciples or my descendants, you are the successors of Solomon."

Hal pulled the trigger.

Shot out from the muzzle, the bullet of light pierced the seven runes and tore through the night sky.

"With this, the signal is sent. The genie of the lamp will then bring the treasure chest over. It might take a long time, though."

Solomon's mystic technique was left somewhere extremely *far away*.

In comparison, the distance between Tokyo New Town and New York would be akin to an afternoon stroll.

Hal said to the girls, "Let's retire for tonight. We'll just have to see what fortune awaits next. We should also focus on work and forget the whole mess troubling us for the time being."

"You are... right. We have to survive the referendum tomorrow first!"

Considerate as always, Orihime instantly replied with a smile.

In fact, the "whole mess troubling us" was directed at his childhood friend in addition to Orihime, but Hal did not make it explicit. Asya nodded, calm as always.

When wearing such an expression, the atmosphere she exuded was frighteningly similar to Auntie Yulia's.

In any case, it was already 11pm.

The date would soon change to welcome the arrival of August 16th. The referendum for approving Hannibal's candidacy was about to be held.

Chapter 5 - Pain and Gain

Part 1

Old Manhattan Island was the concession territory ruled by dragon king Hannibal.

Despite the name of "island," strictly speaking, Old Manhattan Island was a vast sandbank on the mouth of the Hudson River. Following the river downstream, one would pass Old Manhattan Island before reaching the Atlantic Ocean.

Further downstream of Manhattan Island was Liberty Island whose biggest and only selling point was the Statue of Liberty.

The giant statue of a goddess bearing a torch was the symbol of the United States of America. Including the pedestal, the Statue of Liberty reached almost a height of 100m.

Hal and his team were on standby, watched over by the Statue of Liberty, a world heritage site.

Governors Island was also located on the Hudson River. With an area more than ten times of Liberty Island, it was easily large enough to contain a large theme park. In actual fact, the island had facilities including grassland, parks and merry-go-rounds for citizens to use for recreation.

Hal's team was on a grassland in the center of Governors Island.

"Hmm. Simply waiting is making me impatient."

"In terms of common sense from the human world, you need to sound even more impatient when saying that," replied Hal to the muttering of Hannibal who was in human form.

The red dragon king was reclining openly in a chair prepared by the humans, delivering his comment with eyes partially closed in a seemingly good mood. He looked a little restless and quite jubilant. The impression Hal gathered was like that of a child who could not wait for an amusement park to open.

The two of them were seated with a conference room table between them.

Five meters behind Hal, three other humans were present. Important people in New York State—the governor, his aide and Christine, respectively. Same people as last time.

It was currently August 16th, just past 11pm.

Together with Hannibal, they were waiting for the outcome of the referendum.

Seeing as they were in a dragon king's company, having armed units on standby to protect the governor would be pointless. On the human side, the only other people present were two pilots in charge of operating the transport helicopter.

—The referendum had lasted from 8am to 5pm.

—Residents could cast their ballot at temporary voting stations all over New York State. More than five hours had passed since the end of the referendum.

At this moment, the governor's cellphone began to ring.

A call. The handsome governor took out his cellphone from the pocket of his expensive summer suit and lowered his voice to take the call. After roughly thirty seconds, he ended the call, wrote a note on a piece of paper and handed it to his aide.

The aide walked over to Hal uncomfortably and handed him the note in question.

His expression was stiff, his fingers were trembling, presumably unable to conceal his nervousness towards the imminent major event. Feeling deeply sympathetic, Hal accepted the note, took a glance then said, "Do you approve of the dragon king, a certain Mr. Hannibal, to run for governor? The outcome of this referendum is as follows: 12% support, 84% against, 4% invalid... Looks like the motion has been rejected by the majority."

"How regrettable. Sure enough, I failed to win the people's trust within a short time," said Hannibal quietly with a nod.

This referendum had been managed and counted by the New York State

government completely. Hannibal had not verified the ballots himself, which meant that the government had the chance to tamper with vote counts arbitrarily. That being said, everyone probably believed there was no need to do that.

Hannibal simply grinned and said, "The first chapter of my attempt to seize power has concluded with failure. Now that the situation has unfolded to this point, I have no choice left but to take a massive gamble in the second chapter to mount a comeback. Look forward to my immediate rebound."

"I have many ripostes for you, such as you are taking this far too well," Hal retorted rather tactfully.

"But let's put them aside for now. I've got a question. What will your aforementioned comeback be like?"

"Hmm. I suppose I have to rule all of New York State before holding an election. Neglecting this step resulted in such pain. I have learned not to hold back."

"I believe that forcing people to vote at gunpoint wouldn't be a democratic election. Absolutely not."

"Really? Do you humans not engage frequently in the same kind of election tactics too?"

"That's quite a painful jab, but at a time like this, you should keep quiet and let me apply the principles of democracy. I hereby represent all residents of New York State to express absolute disapproval of using physical force to interfere in politics."

"Then no helping it. I will then rely on this to proceed."

Hannibal patted his right arm and smiled. Hal looked up at the blue sky.

"Don't you start getting violent straight away. At least enjoy the election game for a bit."

"No rush for that. There is the presidential election later on. At the present moment, I will focus on consolidating my foundation before transforming myself into a politician who values democracy above all else."

Going with the flow was precisely Hannibal's life philosophy.

But no matter how laid back he seemed, in truth, he was always subconsciously pondering the question of "what should I do to win?" before putting ideas into practice without reservation. Judging from this aspect, he truly lived up to his name as one who had ascended to become a dragon king.

Despite his exasperation, Hal still felt impressed and said, "What civilized people like us lack must be that kind of unfounded valor and confidence like yours, definitely... In a contest of the wildness index, I think you have even Asya beaten."

"I do not understand what you are talking about. However, I do not mind if you loudly proclaim my greatness."

After making jokes, both sides began to take action on their own.

Reclining in the chair, Hannibal extended his open right hand towards Hal. Hal summoned his gun of a magic wand to his right hand and aimed the steel-colored muzzle at Hannibal.

A pictograph of Ruruk Soun appeared on the red dragon king's palm.

A symbol consisting of a sharp rhombus connected to the end of a straight line, this was the Rune of the Spear. Hannibal was planning to use his dragonslaying rune!

"O northern star of the shining spear, grant me the dragonslaying spear!"

"That seal whose name I've forgotten, the second part of whatever he said!"

Just as Hannibal got up and recited an incantation, Hal stood up as well.

In the next instant, a two-meter-long black spear with a metallic shaft appeared in the red dragon king's right hand. The spear tip was the dull color of steel.

When the black spear appeared, the table between the two of them collapsed like a sand sculpture, pulverized. Clearly, Hannibal had yet to grip the spear properly. All he had done was a light swing with his right hand to the side.

Hal activated magical sight.

High-density magical power surrounded Hannibal's humanoid body and the dragonslaying spear.

"Firing a gun at someone who looks human really isn't my cup of tea...!"

Muttering to himself, Hal still pulled the magic gun's trigger.

The fired bullets of red light struck the high-density magical power surrounding Hannibal—They disappeared, meeting the same fate as the table, collapsing like sand.

"Come on, aren't my bullets dragonslaying weapons at least?"

"Hohohoho. My spear is impregnable... and incomparably powerful too!"

Hannibal cackled at the sight of Hal's expression of surprise.

His smile was filled with childishness, making him seem more like a mischievous child than a dragon king.

Meanwhile, the helicopter pilots on standby had started up the propellers. The governor, his aide and Christine, the three of them had boarded. Hal took a glance at them and nodded. The close-range exchange just now was meant to buy time for them to escape.

Thus the helicopter took off, returning to Brooklyn.

Hannibal did not even bother to look, apparently uninterested in the governor and the others.

The governor and company had left but a great army arrived instead. A meteor shower was falling from the distant sky—Several hundred trails of light were descending upon New York City.

Needless to say, the truth of this sudden meteorological show was the red dragon king's summoning of minions.

Each falling meteor was a lesser dragon—the dragon king's small fry.

"Raptors huh...!"

"Well, they are still useful in large numbers despite their incompetence. O human, fight me this evening!"

Keeping the gun aimed at the dragon king, Hal slowly backed away.

The dragonslaying spear was full of mysteries. Staying vigilant, Hal decided to get himself as far away from the spear tip as possible.

By the time Hal backed away, the meteor shower had already ceased.

The meteor shower had lasted less than a minute. During this brief duration, almost a thousand Raptors had already blotted out the sky over their location, the Hudson River, flying in all directions.

—Naturally, other interception units were on standby apart from Hal.

Surface-to-air missiles were fired successively from Brooklyn in New York City.

Ground forces were stationed all over town, prepared to resist the army of Raptors. Their weapons included self-propelled howitzers and rack-mounted halftrack Stinger missile launchers.

The thickness of Raptor skin was enough to withstand machine gunfire.

Although Raptors were referred to as "lizards" by elites, they were still members of dragonkind after all.

Even so, they inevitably collapsed after taking damage from a few consecutive missile hits. Furthermore, dozens of armed helicopters were flying in to support the ground forces.

On the other hand, New York City's population was roughly a couple million.

80% of them had taken the previous few days of preparation time before the referendum to evacuate out of the city temporarily. No voting stations had been set up in New York City today. All venues were outside New York City.

New York City had turned into a rather empty wasteland.

Apart from the National Guard, the American army, air force and navy were also deployed at various locations.

However, helicopters and ground forces alone were not enough to fight dragons flying in the air. The important responsibility of ensuring air superiority fell upon the leviathans—the witches.

At present, a blue figure was gliding in New York airspace to accomplish this mission.

It was Rushalka in crimson armor. Dragon-like in her Queen Form, the wyvern also had bodyguard knights accompanying her.

These were the four fierce feline leviathans—The "serpents" of the WotC.

Part 2

The US military transport helicopter had taken off from an airbase in the Boston countryside and was circling in Brooklyn's airspace near the Hudson River and Manhattan Bridge. Asya was in the helicopter, controlling Rushalka in Queen Form.

"Witches of the Coast, please focus on controlling your partners in flight. Do not leave Rushalka's side under any circumstances. I will take full command from here."

"Understood. We will focus on backing you up, Asya."

Asya issued clear orders and the familiar Christine obeyed.

Apart from this lively and outgoing blonde witch, the other members were also listening to the orders of Asya the master-class witch. This included the youngest witch in the WotC, the twelve-year-old Marie, the dignified and well-bred Maneesha of Indian descent, as well as the African-American witch Kate whose slender figure was like a model's.

Living up to their name as members selected with an emphasis on personality, all of them were very loyal.

Had they been assembled from master-class witches, an impromptu team would definitely have people breaking step. But right now, there was no need to worry about that and Asya could gaze upon their partners with reassurance.

A helicopter was mobilized so that they could supervise this aerial battle from a suitable distance.

In the airspace around Old Manhattan, roughly a thousand Raptors were flying randomly unchecked.

Queen Form Rushalka charged straight into the ranks of the Raptors. The four leviathans of the WotC stood on guard, above, below and flanking the blue wyvern respectively. The silver lynx leviathan Tom Cat, the fierce albino tiger

leviathan Tiger Cat, the blank panther leviathan Wild Cat surrounded by electrical sparks, and Bear Cat whose figure was round like a bear despite being a cat— "Rushalka, expand the range of imperishable protection and enhance defense!"

Asya used Vision Amplification to enhance her sight. Staring intently at her partner with both eyes, she called out from inside the helicopter.

Flying several kilometers ahead, Rushalka heard clearly. Pearly light radiated out from her Queen Form body.

Due to the bond of magic connecting them to each other, Asya's voice could reach Rushalka.

The four leviathans of the WotC were also within the expanded range of Rushalka's protection.

Next, five Raptors flew in with bared fangs, trying to rip Tiger Cat and Wild Cat to shreds.

However, Rushalka's deployed protection bounced the five Raptors far away.

Indeed. The four leviathans of the WotC were actually sent to the field and tasked with other purposes instead of serving as bodyguards.

Then the leader of the fireteam, Asya, looked towards the sixth member—The last witch inside the helicopter.

"E-Excuse me, is it still not yet time for Minadzuki to be summoned...?"

"Don't worry. You just have to summon Minadzuki to assist in defense when we're in trouble. Think of Minadzuki as a bodyguard and a reserve force."

Asya nodded at the worried Hazumi.

Truth be told, one would not place too much faith in the helicopter's armor even when armed with rotary cannons and missiles. Hence, a bodyguard was essential.

With that, everything was ready—

Recently, Asya had been focusing her attention on conquering her childhood friend. Having Rushalka charge into enemy ranks, surrounded by foes, made her

feel quite nostalgic.

Doing unfamiliar things for an extended duration was quite mentally draining after all.

She must go on a rampage to reaffirm her original self. Fortunately, she had plenty of *additional* weapons on her side.

"Rushalka will maintain the deployment of imperishable protection. Christine, Kate, Maneesha and Marie, you will each activate your partner's pseudo-divinity to launch magical attacks. Since we're surrounded by enemies entirely, there's no need to aim in particular. Just defeat the enemies with all your strength!"

The four witches of the WotC immediately followed Asya's orders.

Christine's partner, the flying silver lynx, Tom Cat, possessed the attribute of Water.

She summoned a tsunami in the sky—the raging waves rushed at dozens of Raptors at once, crushing them with water pressure.

The African-American witch Kate's black panther, Wild Cat, was of the Lightning attribute. Lightning strikes fell madly like rain, incinerating ten-odd Raptors nearby.

The witch of Indian descent, Maneesha, was controlling the white tiger, Tiger Cat, whose attribute was Wind. Tiger Cat shot out a wild flurry of wind blades like a machine gun, also slaying ten-odd Raptors as well.

Then there was the youngest newcomer witch, Marie. Her partner was the ursine feline, Bear Cat. Although her attribute was Gravity, the potency was far less than Luna Francois', of course. Nevertheless, she still tried her best to manipulate gravity, sending flying Raptors crashing into the ground, killing them directly.

—With that, they succeeded in wiping out seventy to eighty Raptors.

Asya nodded approvingly. The WotC's "serpents" were simply considered fire support, but they had proved surprisingly effective in restraining the enemy. After all, the enemies were all minions of Hannibal, hence even the small fry

Raptors were empowered by the might of dragonbane.

Given such circumstances, even Luna would have been unable to oppose them prior to establishing her covenant with Hal.

Tactically speaking, treating the WotC as flying artillery was the best division of roles.

"Except for Marie, the three of you please attack using pseudo-divinity again."

The newcomer witch, Marie, was still Level 1, only capable of using pseudo-divinity once a day.

The other members immediately obeyed Asya's command. A tsunami, lightning strikes and wind blades raged across the sky again, instantly killing dozens of Raptors.

However, Kate and Maneesha were only Level 2 witches and this meant the end of their offensive.

Level 3 witch Christine continued and summoned a third tsunami, thus depleting the final usage of pseudo-divinity by the leviathans of the WotC.

They ended up destroying almost 30% of the enemy forces in total, leaving roughly seven hundred of them.

"I'll handle the rest. Please call back your 'serpents' from Rushalka's side!"

Basking in the protective radiance deployed by the blue wyvern in Queen Form, the WotC's four leviathans suddenly vanished. The witches had followed Asya's request to withdraw their leviathans. Now, Asya had free rein to employ tactical mobility.

Asya instantly commanded, "Rushalka, equip the Rune of the Bow."

A pair of arms made of ruby were equipped on Rushalka.

A crimson longbow manifested on the left arm while eight arrows, made of ice from arrowhead to the fletchings, beautifully sculpted like artwork, appeared over her head.

The arrows, like exquisite ice sculptures, were products of Water pseudo-divinity.

Rushalka's right hand grabbed an arrow, nocked it and extended the bow.

"Shotgun, fire!"

The arrow was shot on Asya's command.

After being fired, the ice arrow shattered into over three hundred fragments, turning into small and sharp arrowheads to attack the Raptors.

This hail of projectiles was more akin to the output of dozens of rotary cannons than a shotgun shell.

The Raptors caught in this storm of ice were instantly destroyed—They vanished in the blink of an eye.

This was thanks to the dragonslaying power residing within the shards of ice. This one attack was enough to wipe out roughly a hundred Raptors, but Rushalka was not done firing.

"Second shot, fire!"

Rushalka fired the second arrow out of the eight arrows she had just summoned.

The second shotgun blast of ice took down another hundred Raptors or so.

In the end, Asya and Rushalka repeated this for a total of seven times, completely annihilating the Raptors summoned to the New York sky.

Furthermore, her ammunition was not completely consumed.

Eight arrows had been created just now. Rushalka nocked the final arrow on the bow.

"Target enemy reinforcements. Rushalka!"

Asya's blue partner fired the eighth arrow on her command.

There was not a single Raptor remaining in Rushalka's vicinity but other reinforcements were showing up in the distance. Salamander-shaped flames were appearing in the sky over the Old Manhattan Concession— The minions known as Hannibal's personal guard—The Army of Fire.

Numbering roughly three hundred. The salamanders descended upon the darkness that was New York City, lighting up the entire metropolis.

The shotgun blast of ice arrived after the reinforcements arrived.

However, it failed to work. The ice shards were all destroyed before they could reach the Army of Fire.

"As expected of his personal guard..."

Unlike Hannibal, Asya was not the type to take delight in fighting a powerful foe.

With the arrival of enemies that could not be defeated by the same tactics, Asya frowned inside the helicopter.

"So you were hiding such a powerful trump card. Well played, Tyrannos of the Bow."

Not too long ago, the Raptor army in the air had been wiped out by Rushalka in Queen Form.

However, this scene was nothing more than an exotic side show performance for Hannibal. He spoke quietly in a calm tone while using his right hand to slowly thrust his spear in front of him.

This was not done to pierce Hal but to aim the spear tip at Hal's heart.

"I never expected a counterfeit dragon king... O Queen, so it turns out that you offered ideas to help him?"

"Ludicrous. Do you believe that I am a woman who would be so considerate as to look after this guy?"

"Fair enough point. It is truly wonderful to see that death has not changed you at all."

Hal's magic gun was replying using Hinokagutsuchi's voice. Hannibal snickered.

Meanwhile, listening to the conversation between a former dragon king and a current dragon king, Hal was in no mood for chatting. He aimed his magic gun at Hannibal while Hannibal in human form had the spear pointed at him.

There was a gap of five meters between them.

Even so, Hal still could not move. The dragonslaying spear—its tip—was giving off magical power that enveloped Hal entirely, turning him frozen.

Twelve runes of Ruruk Soun had appeared on the spear tip.

Under this arrangement, the runes signified "O spear of mine, gather the northern star's power to advance with ferocity."

"A technique of assured annihilation...!"

Hal deployed imperishable protection. The pearly light enveloped his entire body.

However, his body still remained stiff. This was probably a special attack that he could not defend completely against using protection alone. Hal realized he was exceedingly afraid of the dragonslaying spear. His entire body was withered and frozen as though he were encountering sleep paralysis.

Due to the fear and pressure, his throat was parched.

...By the time Hal came to his senses, he noticed Hannibal approaching him and making a thrust with his spear.

"Wahhhhhhhh!?"

Rather than a stab from a spear, this strike felt like being violently bashed by a giant battering ram.

Such was the power behind Hannibal's one strike.

Since the location was a wide open grassland without any obstructions, Hal was blown away entirely, falling forty or fifty meters away. The only reason he survived was due to deploying imperishable protection in advance.

However, Hal still experienced an impact that felt as though all the bones in his body shattered.

He still showed confusion on his face after getting up. Hal's lifeline—the pearly defensive barrier—had rapidly disappeared as a result of one attack from Hannibal in human form.

Even Pavel Galad's technique of assured annihilation was nowhere this potent!

"Were you a true dragon king, I would expect far more trouble... In the case of a counterfeit, breaking such protection is effortless for me."

The strongest dragon king-class enemy spoke casually with a smile.

Furthermore, he was walking slowly to Hal. *I must hurry and escape.* However, Hal's body turned paralyzed again. At this rate, death was all but assured.

"In that case!"

Hal focused all his strength in his right index finger. Controlling the physical body with single-minded focus was the only way to forget the fear and pressure. Hal concentrated his mind completely on pulling the magic gun's trigger.

Baaaaaaang!

A red bullet of light shot out. Hal was firing straight at Hannibal in front of him, but the twelve Ruruk Soun runes of "O spear of mine, gather the northern star's power to advance with ferocity" continued to glow, displayed in front of the dragon king.

Hal's bullet of light vanished the moment it struck this arrangement of runes.

The magic gun told Hal that this was the dragonslaying spear's technique of assured annihilation, Thrusting Skyrocket.

"So it's not a special move that's only for offense..."

"Didn't I tell you? My spear is impregnable."

Hannibal smiled proudly and approached, aiming the spear tip at Hal.

In no rush to run forward, he strode step by step to approach Hal, unhurried in his pace. Rather than charging at high speed, this exemplified a dragon king's dignity and majesty instead. Such was a king's march forward.

Hal trembled. Unless he found some kind of solution, his body was going to freeze up again.

Hannibal was roughly ten meters away from Hal. The fear of death drove Hal to activate full-auto mode and fire all the bullets in the magic gun. This was his

technique of assured annihilation.

[illegible]

"Wow, what potent firepower, Tyrannos!"

The runes of Ruruk Soun saved Hannibal the effort of defending again.

Even shooting all remaining ammunition in full-auto mode could not breach the twelve-rune arrangement of "O spear of mine, gather the northern star's power to advance with ferocity."

All the bullets vanished in midair. However, Hannibal halted too.

It was this instant. The firepower of twenty-eight consecutive shots finally managed to block the dragon king's continued advance.

Although the achievement was meager, in such circumstances, some achievement was better than none!

"Counting on you, Juujouji!"

"Very well! Akuro-Ou, please!"

Hal suddenly shouted. The hidden girl responded to Hal's call.

The white fox-wolf, Akuro-Ou, also raced forward like cavalry. Akuro-Ou had shrunk down to her smallest size of roughly three meters, allowing her partner to ride on her back.

Juujouji Orihime had not gone off with Asya and the other witches, instead staying here on standby to support Hal in case of emergencies.

The dashing Akuro-Ou used one of her tails to pick up Hal nimbly, allowing him to mount her snow-white back. Thus, Hal was seated right behind Orihime.

Akuro-Ou then used her momentum to take a leap. Orihime immediately issued orders, "Use the Rune of the Bow and fire magic... Punish him!"

Kyohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Pseudo-divinity was activated simultaneously as Akuro-Ou took flight.

Akuro-Ou's nine tails each fired a shot, a total of nine black arrowheads. The

arrowheads all exploded just before striking Hannibal, turning into crimson flames to attack the dragon king.

"Hahahahaha! What a grand welcoming party. Looks like I must get serious too!"

Despite the blazing flames scorching him, Hannibal laughed heartily.

However, Hannibal's figure, engulfed in flames, disappeared from Hal's sight—For only several seconds.

The blazing conflagration swirled into a vortex. A red elite dragon suddenly appeared inside it. His body length was roughly twenty meters. The exoskeleton around the chest resembled armor. Holding a long black spear in his right hand, he was standing upright sternly...

Needless to say, this was precisely the dragon form of Red Hannibal.

The most powerful dragon king-class opponent was finally fighting in his true form.

ROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!

ROOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!

ROOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!

The red dragon king opened his gigantic jaws and kept roaring fiercely. Hearing these roars while in the air, Hal and Orihime gulped at the same time.

"Hinokagutsuchi... That thing I told you about, can't you pick up the pace?"

"Then give me slightly more power. Fortunately, it is quite close now, so I should not require too much."

Hal touched the magic gun and asked, prompting Hinokagutsuchi to answer immediately.

Power—Naturally, that meant magical power. Starting the previous night, Hal and the dragon queen had been secretly using *a certain magic* continuously. It looked like their efforts had been rewarded.

In order to output a new pulse of magical power, Hal focused his awareness on his heart.

Part 3

The Army of Fire had appeared over the Old Manhattan Concession.

A great army consisting of roughly three hundred salamander-shaped flames, they were all minions under Hannibal's command.

Unlike Raptors, the Army of Fire did not fly all over the place. Instead, they hovered neatly in the air like soldiers awaiting the commander's orders.

"If we rush into that army, it'll be checkmate for us like how they took care of the Raptors last time. That being said, we have no choice but to attack. What troublesome enemies... Hazumi-san."

"Y-Yes!"

The obedient junior witch instantly responded in a stiff voice as soon as Asya spoke to her.

Shirasaka Hazumi was like an angel and did not like conflict. However, she must have felt how terrifying dragon king Hannibal was, thus making her more nervous than during the usual battles.

Currently, Asya and Hazumi were the only witches remaining on the transport helicopter.

After the salamanders showed up, Asya immediately instructed the members of the WotC to meet up with ground forces. Even without the ability to use pseudo-divinity for now, four "serpents" still stood as valuable combat potential.

"First Rushalka and I will test out the enemy. Minadzuki is important backup, so please don't carelessly enter the combat zone."

"Understood."

No good would come out of throwing all their available forces into the front lines.

Looking back at history, many battles were won through the efforts of reserve forces. After predicting possible mistakes that the still inexperienced Hazumi might make and warning her about them— Asya looked at the aerial battlefield again from her vantage point in the helicopter.

Rushalka was in the sky over Chinatown in the southern part of Old Manhattan. The Army of Fire were in a formation at the center of this wasteland—above Central Park.

They were separated by roughly ten kilometers.

The Army of Fire moved in unison and flew towards Rushalka. In addition, the hands of the three hundred salamanders had gained weapons without anyone noticing earlier. Using the four fingers on their right forelimb, they were wielding black spears dexterously!

Runes of Ruruk Soun were arranged in front of all the salamanders.

The runes were all the same, reading "O spear of mine, gather the northern star's power to advance with ferocity" in every case.

"—!? Rushalka, evasive maneuvers. Hurry and circle to the back of the enemy!"

Asya issued emergency orders but a surprising result awaited her.

Despite always following orders faithfully, Rushalka did not respond this time. She did turn herself to dodge at least, but that was as far as she could go. As her partner, Asya instinctively guessed the reason.

"Overwhelmed by the enemy's pressure?"

In that case—Asya yelled.

"Retreat, Rushalka! Leave the city and withdraw to the riverside!"

If attack orders could not be executed due to pressure, perhaps a retreat command was possible?

Asya was correct. Continuing to face the Army of Fire, Rushalka started flying backwards.

Ruahalka flew from Chinatown in the south of Old Manhattan to the city's

entrance, Manhattan Bridge.

Directly below her was the great river flowing north-south in New York State —The Hudson River's mouth. Rushalka continued to back away, retreating to the sky over Liberty Island, the Statue of Liberty, Governors Island, *etc.*

Asya nodded.

Ruashalka's retreat speed was faster than the Army of Fire's advance. Hence, their separation had lengthened, reducing the pressure on Rushalka somewhat. Asya immediately commanded, "Invoke pseudo-divinity. Wall of Water!"

Kyuahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Pseudo-divinity activated together with the roar. In the next second, the surface of the torrential Hudson River rose up, forming a gigantic towering pillar of water— The great volume of river water was enough to form a sphere surrounding Rushalka in all directions.

The sphere's diameter was roughly sixty meters, resulting in a protective layer sufficient to cover the gigantic body of the "serpent" with no blindspots.

"Add the enchantment of imperishable protection!"

The shield of water guarding Rushalka began to glow with pearly radiance.

This was the strongest defensive formation, a combination of pseudo-divinity and a Tyrannos' power. So long as she persisted in sniping the enemy forces while under protection— "Rushalka, although I'm not Orihime-san, we'll have to fight a Battle of Nagashino here!"

The partner in Queen Form readied an arrow of light on the crimson bow and shot swiftly.

This arrow pierced a salamander squarely—That was supposed to happen but the arrow of light disappeared as soon as it struck the arrangement of Ruruk Soun runes reading "O spear of mine, gather the northern star's power to advance with ferocity."

The second and third arrows met the same fate.

"The enemy side has iron-clad defense too... It's like a phalanx of spearmen."

The Army of Fire arrived while Asya clicked her tongue.

The three hundred salamanders scattered in front of Rushalka all at once, closing in from all angles, using the spears in their hands to stab the water sphere. No matter which direction, there were salamanders everywhere.

Kyuahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

The blue wyvern roared again, but this time was due to pain.

Rather than pulling out their spears, the three hundred salamanders pushed their spears deeper into the shield of water. Tormented by pain, Rushalka screamed even more acutely.

Hannibal's technique of assured annihilation was capable of inflicting physical damage even with imperishable protection in the way!

"Rushalka!?"

Her partner was enduring the pain of being stabbed by three hundred drills.

Realizing this, Asya looked grim. Considering Rushalka's current condition, she should be able to completely block even Pavel Galad's technique of assured annihilation.

However, this solid defense was being tragically obliterated by Hannibal's minions.

"If the general shows up now...!"

"Asya-san! P-Please look at that!"

Inside a helicopter circling over the Hudson river, the two witches watched the battle situation.

Asya looked in the direction indicated by Hazumi and gasped. What she feared had come true.

On Governors Island where Hal and others had met the red dragon king—

The island's ground was ablaze from a magical conflagration. Amid the sea of flames, a gigantic elite dragon—no, Manhattan's king—was getting ready to rise.

Dragon king Hannibal opened his great jaws and roared repeatedly.

ROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!

ROOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!

ROOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!

One could call it a great noise that shook heaven and earth.

This howling further granted the Army of Fire more power. The salamanders stabbed deeper with their spears, immediately breaking the protective shield.

The sixty-meter-diameter water sphere barrier guarding Rushalka—

It began to collapse with water splashing.

The sphere shrank progressively. In merely a minute or two, its volume had been reduced to half of its original. Hannibal came forward personally, flying slowly to approach Rushalka and deliver the final blow.

Naturally, the dragon king himself was wielding a spear too. All was lost—Just as everyone thought that...

'Please... Hang on a bit longer!'

Asya seemed to hear the voice of her childhood friend. Rather than her ear, it was the Rune of the Bow surfacing on the back of her left hand that had transmitted the message to her.

"Rushalka, use the Water Cannon and the Rune of the Bow simultaneously!"

This was her third time invoking pseudo-divinity today.

The Hudson River's water surface bulged up violently again, spewing a water pillar upwards.

This is a technique using the river below as artillery to fire several hundred tons of water as ammunition. Together with the Rune of the Bow's firepower, it was upgraded into a dragonslaying attack.

This attack was evidently effective.

Water extinguished fire. This time, a natural law of the universe took effect.

Swallowed by the great flood of water from the Hudson River, the three hundred salamanders disappeared with a sizzle.

"Unable to withstand attacks from below—or rather, flanking attacks. Sure enough, their strengths and weaknesses are the same as a phalanx..." said Asya quietly after realizing the properties of the Rune of the Spear.

The water cannon earlier had also allowed Rushalka to bolster her defenses.

Having shrunk to less than half its size, the defensive water sphere replenished its moisture, returning to its original diameter of sixty meters.

Used as a cannon, the river water gushed up to a height of seven or eight hundred meters.

The water pillar then fell swiftly into the Hudson River like a gust of violent wind—In the next second, Red Hannibal charged in just as this momentary downpour ended!

"Although I have forgotten how many millennia I have fought with the dragonslaying spear by my side..."

Hannibal made a straight forward thrust with the dragonslaying spear, flying to make a beeline towards Rushalka in the air over Governors Island.

"This is my first time fighting an imitation dragon king!"

"Rushalka!"

The dragon king tried to pierce the defensive water sphere with the tip of his spear.

The sphere guarding Rushalka barely managed to block Hannibal's thrust.

As a result, the sphere vanished in that instant. Hundreds of tons of river water spilled into the Hudson River.

"How about that? Your petty tricks end here, right!?"

Hannibal resumed flying towards Rushalka. The red dragon king extended his spear. Now, the imitation queen no longer had any defensive shield. Asya roared, "Rushalka, retreat first!"

The partner obeyed Asya's command and backed away swiftly.

Hannibal gave chase. Fortunately, their initial speeds were different. The blue wyvern had an overwhelming advantage in speed.

The time needed for Rushalka to start accelerating from rest was extremely short.

Within only ten-odd seconds, Rushalka was able to reach maximum speed, displaying her agile and nimble flying form. In contrast, Hannibal glided slowly first before speeding up gradually.

In a certain way, Hannibal's leisurely appearance was more fitting of a king's style.

Consequently, this battle of pursuit was initially in Rushalka's favor—

"Rushalka, please keep your distance and continue to escape. Don't fight Hannibal head on. You must flank him!"

Asya kept issuing detailed orders.

Despite the slow start, Hannibal's flying speed was quite high once given enough time to accelerate.

Furthermore, he continued to exude pressure that stiffened Rushalka's movements. He was not an opponent easy to escape from.

Rushalka fled to the sky over Liberty Island where the Statue of Liberty was located with Hannibal in pursuit.

However, after two or three minutes of chasing the blue wyvern, the red dragon king suddenly halted in the air and started to laugh.

"Hahahahaha! I will need helpers to catch a swift swallow. Then I shall summon some shrikes!"

Flames—Salamander-shaped flames appeared one after another in Hannibal's surroundings.

Roughly three hundred salamanders. With that, Asya understood. Rushalka's earlier attack had simply extinguished the flames. The Army of Fire was not vanquished. After a while, they would revive like this...

As expected of a dragon king, the gap in power was too great. The worst-case scenario appeared in Asya's mind.

Would she be able to continue? Most likely, she was going to run out of

options—

"Asya-san, please look at this!"

At that moment, Hazumi, who had been on standby the whole time, handed her a memo.

Due to focusing on the battle, Asya had not noticed that Hazumi had been in wireless communications with someone. Written on the memo was an instruction from the other person.

"Rushalka, retreat to the bridge quickly!"

Rushalka started flying according to Asya's demand.

With her back to Hannibal and his great army, she flew north swiftly, in other words, towards Old Manhattan.

There were only two kilometers to Manhattan Bridge and it would not take the wyvern's wings very long to get there.

Hannibal's army was out in full force, chasing after the fleeing Rushalka.

The dragon king took the lead with the three hundred salamanders behind him. The king and his pawns each wielded a spear, giving off vibes of determined slaughter.

Hannibal's flying in the lead was still sluggish.

Hence, Rushalka was not going to be caught straight away. But once Hannibal got up to speed—and this time, with a great number of salamanders as hunting hounds—any slight mistake and all would be lost.

Meanwhile, the transport helicopter carrying Asya and Hazumi was also flying towards Manhattan Bridge.

This was due to Hazumi asking the pilot to do so.

Seeing Rushalka only seconds away from arriving over the bridge, Asya said, "Release Queen Form. Next user up!"

Rushalka flew over Manhattan Bridge.

The ruby armor and arms vanished. This time, the one who obtained armor and entered Queen Form was Akuro-Ou, on standby at the bridge since a while

ago— The white nine-tailed fox-wolf was equipped with Queen Form's armor.

There was a golden cannon on her back as well.

Kuohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Akuro-Ou barked sonorously and fired the golden cannon on her back continuously. Shooting out of the barrel were flashes of red light, targeting the Army of Fire pursuing Rushalka.

However, with Hannibal as the vanguard, the spearmen used that power again.

Once again, the runic arrangement of "O spear of mine, gather the northern star's power to advance with ferocity" appeared in front of the dragon king and his soldiers.

The cannon shots disappeared upon striking the runes.

Hence, what took credit for halting the army's advance was not Akuro-Ou but a gigantic "box" descending from the sky.

Moving towards the ground from the starry sky—

As a rough description, it was rectangular in shape but enormous enough to serve as a coffin for a thirty to forty-meter tall giant.

The box was colored white, making it especially conspicuous against the darkness of night.

It seemed to be made of wood. Indeed, it was a gigantic wooden ship.

At first glance, it seemed to be descending slowly, but the white ark was actually moving at the river at over fifty kilometers per hour. However, the water surface remained calm without any ripples.

It looked like the ark's descent was guided by gravity control magic.

The landing was quite similar to Genbu-Ou's arrival in Tokyo New Town two months prior. Perhaps this level of similarity was only natural. After all, the giant turtle Genbu-Ou and the white ark were both created for the same purpose.

Minions for serving a dragon king or Tyrannos. A mode of transportation to

take their masters to the sea of stars—

"So that's Solomon's ark..."

Asya murmured while looking out of the helicopter at the white ark below.

The landing site was not far from Manhattan Bridge. This was no accident, because Akuro-Ou was not the only one on the bridge. Hal, the one who had summoned the ark, was there too with Orihime.

"Oh?"

Meanwhile, Hannibal muttered while leading his flying army of salamanders.

"Handiwork related to Ruruk Soun huh? Hohoho, Tyrannos, what exactly are your intentions...?"

Despite expecting a trap, Hannibal continued to march his army forward.

The fearless dragon king wished to crush Hal's group, trap and ark included.

Part 4

Solomon's ark.

This ship's hiding place was not on Earth but in the domain called the sea of stars by dragonkind—A corner of the universe. More concretely, its precise location was the asteroid belt lying between Jupiter and Saturn. Since it was within the confines of the solar system just like the Earth, it would be considered relatively near for astronomical distances.

The effect of the Legacy Inheritance spell that Hal had been casting continuously since the previous day was to summon this treasure chest, containing Solomon's legacy, from across the unimaginably vast distance of its hiding place.

This ark took all night to traverse the sea of stars and was now floating on the Hudson River.

The ship had not been moored with an anchor, yet it was floating motionlessly on the river surface. As expected of a great sorcerer's ship. Despite being a wooden ship, it possessed the inexplicable ability to break through the atmosphere like the dragons.

Hal looked at the ark from Manhattan Bridge and spoke over a military transceiver.

"I'll open the treasure immediately to take out the items. Asya and Rushalka, continue attacking."

'Understood. I hope you'll power up as soon as possible.'

Hal and Asya were conversing.

His childhood friend and Hazumi had also confirmed the battle situation from the helicopter in the air.

'I've also figured out the characteristics of the enemy's Rune of the Spear, more or less. I was looking for a chance to make full use of my discoveries.'

"You're talking about that, right? Rather than a spear, it's more like a phalanx rune."

'Yes. Since a head on clash won't work, I'm thinking of inflicting flanking attacks as much as possible. That being said, Hannibal's version of the phalanx is pretty mobile.'

Phalanx. This was an infantry tactic dating back to ancient Greece.

A row consisted of foot soldiers, each equipped with a long spear and a large shield, standing side by side. Then these rows were repeated in a rectangular formation. During combat, the soldiers would march forward while keeping the rectangular formation and attack with their spears. When the front row of infantry was defeated, the next row would step up, thus maintaining offensive strength.

Due to amassed numbers, the row of large shields could also form a fortress. Defensive strength was obvious. The hedge of spears from the upward pointing spears of the soldiers in the latter rows was also able to block projectile weapons from the enemy.

This was an ancient Greek military tactic that combined offense with defense.

However, mobility was relatively low due to how closely packed the soldiers were. This was the weakness of the tactic...

Asya verified the combat situation after ending her call. Not only was Hal on Manhattan Bridge but Juujouji and Akuro-Ou too. The white fox-wolf had exited Queen Form. Rushalka was not nearby because she had gone off to carry out the next step in the plan.

Hannibal's army was currently aimed at the ark, marching forward without impediment.

Neither the commander-in-chief in the lead nor the salamanders had reached top speed, hence the situation was not too urgent yet...

"Juujouji, I'm relying on you to stop the lizard army after I open the treasure chest."

"Very well... Please be careful, Haruga-kun!"

Hal nodded in response to the worried girl and focused on his task of "opening the box".

Open sesame. Hal took a shortcut and omitted most of the incantation. From the white ark—seventy-two blue-white ghostlights flew out!

They were ghostlights shaped like dragons, similar to leviathans in size.

"Serpent ectoplasm..."

The catalog of treasures automatically entered Hal's mind while Legacy Inheritance was in progress.

As a result, Hal knew everything. The true identities of the serpent ectoplasm were the souls of ancient leviathans that had lost physical form. Despite losing their flesh, they had not lost their magical power— The seventy-two dragonoid ghostlights spread their wings like birds and flew all over the sky.

The ghostlights flew freely with agility, like seabirds flocking by the ocean. Then something tiny and sparkling from the flying serpent ectoplasm fell towards Manhattan Bridge.

Hal reached out to the sky and opened his right palm.

The object dropped by the serpent ectoplasm was falling as though in slow motion. Finally, it fell into the hand of Hal the successor.

"Solomon's ring..."

It was a gold ring, the instrument of magic control left behind by the great sorcerer of antiquity. Hal placed the ring onto his right index finger and muttered the ring's other name.

"The Rune of the Ring...!"

A new magic symbol appeared on Hal's right palm.

An extremely simple seal of "©," it was the Rune of the Ring, neither a bow nor twin katana. When that rune surfaced, the flock of flying serpent ectoplasm displayed new movement. One after another, they flew towards Hal who was on the ground.

More precisely, their target was not Hal but the ring worn by Hal. One by one,

King Solomon's legacy absorbed the servants that were flying overhead.

With seventy-two serpent souls inside, the ring surged with massive magical power.

And the ring's successor was able to control this power arbitrarily.

"!?"

Apart from magical power, there was another dramatic change.

From the moment he put on the ring, Hal could feel the presence of hearts.

First, there were the hearts of the serpent souls gathered inside the ring— They were overjoyed to return to the earth after thousands of years, liberated from the ark that served as gigantic shackles.

"So it's a ring that can listen to the voices of 'serpents' and sense their thoughts and feelings..." Hal muttered after actually experiencing one of the functions listed in the catalog.

There was a rumor regarding King Solomon and a magic ring. Legend had it that the archangel Michael had bestowed this ring upon him, granting him the power to make angels and demons do his bidding as well as the ability to listen to the voices of all plants and animals. This was a story recorded in multiple grimoires and the Old Testament of the Bible.

Hal was using the ring's power to expand the range of his extrasensory perception.

Akuro_ou and Rushalka were quite fired up to fight the army of salamanders.

In addition, the WotC's "serpents" in Brooklyn were tense due to sensing the dragon king's presence.

Like machinery, the salamanders only obeyed the dragon king's orders.

"Come to think of it, all of our 'serpents' are female..."

Hal was reminded. Due to their appearance as ferocious beasts, without communicating heart to heart in this manner, it would be all too easy to forget that all leviathans, the allies of mankind, were female.

Akuro-Ou and Rushalka were genuine ladies, the same gender as Orihime and

Asya.

While feeling slightly apologetic, Hal established a psychic connection to their souls. This was to output magical power directly, several times stronger than before, without needing to go through the witches' hearts. This was also an ability granted to Hal by the ring.

"All ready. Juujouji...!"

"Roger that! Akuro-Ou, use a killer move to stop those dragons from advancing. Don't hold back and use fire magic to bombard them!"

Orihime responded to Hal's request firmly and powerfully.

While the "serpents" were receiving substantial magical power from Hal...

Hannibal and his three hundred salamanders continued to march on, merely four or five hundred meters away from Manhattan Bridge.

Their goal was to crush Tyrannos Haruga Haruomi and his followers.

Having obtained sufficient speed, Hannibal's army was going to reach Manhattan Bridge in ten-odd seconds. At that moment, Akuro-Ou attacked first from the bridge.

Nine *black arrowheads* had manifested over the white fox-wolf's head.

These mysterious arrowheads resembled primitive stone tools crafted from obsidian. They were manifestations of the Rune of the Bow as weapons.

The nine black arrowheads turned into hovering artillery, lined up in a row in front of Manhattan Bridge.

Aimed at Hannibal's army, the arrowheads all fired at the same time. Flame projectiles were shot out from their tips at a rate exceeding a hundred times per second.

Fully automatic fire. This was the technique of assured annihilation that Hal had innovated when forging his magic gun.

Naturally, the hail of bullets was directed at the red dragon king's army.

However, neither Hannibal nor the salamanders following his lead faltered.

The Ruruk Soun incantation of "O spear of mine, gather the northern star's power to advance with ferocity" continued to withstand the rain of bullets brought by a technique of assured annihilation. The great army persisted in pushing forward.

Even so, Akuro-Ou's technique of assured annihilation succeeded in slowing down Hannibal's army.

This was thanks to the unmitigated and overwhelming firepower of full auto.

"Akuro-Ou... Your pseudo-divinity's power has increased as expected."

From inside the helicopter flying above the Hudson River, Asya watched the battle situation around Manhattan Bridge and nodded.

The potency of the magical power that Akuro-Ou used was even stronger than that of leviathans partnered with Level 5 witches.

This blessing was not limited to Akuro-Ou alone.

"If we can benefit from the Rune of the Ring too—Rushalka!"

Seeing that the time was ripe, Asya called out to the blue wyvern that had left the battlefield on her own, flying to the altitude of seven kilometers over New York City, waiting for the opportunity for a surprise attack.

"Activate technique of assured annihilation while descending. Full burst!"

This was her fourth time invoking pseudo-divinity today.

This left only one remaining invocation, meaning that the trump card of Double Casting was no longer available—

With the situation critical, Rushalka rushed down at Hannibal's army.

She returned to Queen Form again. The two arms of ruby reappeared with a crimson bow held in her left and an ice arrow in her right.

Furthermore, Rushalka was not the only archer.

After she began her rapid descent, support archers appeared behind the blue wyvern.

They looked identical to Rushalka in Queen Form—clones, numbering close to a hundred. The clones were all wielding crimson bows and ice arrows.

The Rushalka army fired arrows while charging at the Hannibal army from above.

With every shot, a new arrow would be created in the right hand. Rushalka and her clones were all able to fire arrows continuously without pause.

—The Rune of the Spear was impregnable when facing frontal assaults, but was powerless against flanking attacks.

In order to strike at this weakness, Rushalka had personally gone up into the sky to launch a surprise attack. However, Hannibal's composure in handling this situation was to a maddening degree.

"O dragonslaying spear, offer imperishable protection to my great army!"

The dragon king ordered the spear in his hand, instantly deploying faint pearly radiance.

The red dragon king's protection range was not only large enough to cover his own massive body but also the three hundred salamanders under his command.

Defended by both the runes of Ruruk Soun and imperishable protection, the Hannibal army had no blind spots.

Akuro-Ou and Rushalka persisted in unleashing techniques of assured annihilation for almost a minute, but not even a single salamander pawn was defeated, much less a dragon king.

Rushalka's hundred clones also vanished completely.

However, Aysa had saved a secret move for last.

In addition to Akuro-Ou, Rushalka had also obtained extraordinary magical power thanks to the Rune of the Ring's blessing. Specifically, her total magical power rivaled that of Hannibal, who was dragon king-class.

A Level 3 witch like Orihime might have been unable to control it completely.

But in the case of Asya the master-class witch and Europe's strongest ace—

"Rushalka, now is the time. Technique of assured annihilation, *sun-shooting divine bow!*"

Rushalka lowered her altitude to almost ground level.

She circled around to the side of the Hannibal army that was advancing towards Manhattan Bridge and used the Rune of the Bow's ultimate mystic technique.

Shining with golden splendor, the arrow of light shot out from the crimson bow.

In her current state, Rushalka was capable of firing the sun-shooting divine bow without Double Casting pseudo-divinity.

Furthermore, this trump card was made even more effective by the previous barrage of fully automatic fire to weaken imperishable protection—Gambling everything on this arrow, Asya watched it fly.

Roughly fifty meters in length, the arrow of light turned into a *great serpent of flame*.

The serpent devoured salamanders one after another, wiping out forty or fifty of them within the blink of an eye. The serpent even entangled Hannibal and tried to swallow him, who tried to stab using his dragonslaying spear, but just as the dragon king raised his spear for a swing—the *great serpent of flame* exploded.

The giant explosion in the air over the Hudson River had enough range to cover the entire Hannibal army.

Flashing of light, flickering of flames, massive rumbling, and wind from the blast persisted for a minute or two.

When everything settled, the enemy army was cleanly eliminated. Not a single salamander remained at the scene. Even the gigantic Red Hannibal was nowhere to be seen.

The only magic beast still in the air was Rushalka in Queen Form.

"A-Asya-san, you did it!"

Hazumi immediately cried out in joy and hugged Asya tightly. Inside the same helicopter, she had been watching Asya's valiant battle with bated breath.

However, while watching her angelic junior rejoicing, Asya—

"Rushalka, emergency de-materialization! Hurry... Run away fast!" Asya immediately commanded without having even the time to cast Enemy Detection.

There was no rational basis. If anything, Asya's reaction probably stemmed from a rigid belief that a dragon king could not possibly have perished just like that. More importantly, she had sensed an incoming crisis, enough to chill her to the bone.

Just as Asya issued her command, the dragonslaying spear immediately flew out from the Hudson River.

The spear flew, targeting Rushalka in the air, piercing the ruby chest armor.

Fortunately, Asya had commanded a retreat ahead of time. Just before the spear tip skewered the heartmetal inside Rushalka, she vanished instantly.

In the nick of time. But not unscathed.

"Gu... ahhhhhhhh!"

"Asya-san!?"

The pain from a dragonslaying weapon was not only experienced by the "serpent" but also the covenantee as well.

Holding her hand to her chest, Asya collapsed forward. She felt as though a massive hole had been gouged out of her heart and had difficulty breathing properly.

Hazumi hastily supported Asya who was unable to stand on her own.

Meanwhile, the spear that had forced Rushalka's exit remained motionless in the air.

It was faithfully waiting for its master to leave the river and retrieve it.

"The sudden amplification in power truly surprised me... However, there are limits to a 'mock dragon king' after all. That being said—"

Hannibal gripped the dragonslaying spear again and muttered quietly.

"It might be a different matter if I could fight the queen of the past directly. O Tyrannos of the Bow, you have many toys hidden up your sleeve."

Dragon king Hannibal gazed upon Manhattan Bridge.

In the air over the bridge was no longer Akuro-Ou but the Crimson Queen, in other words, Hinokagutsuchi's physical body when she was alive as a dragon king. One could think of it as Haruga Haruomi's avatar currently.

However, Asya felt very uneasy inside.

Between her and her childhood friend Haruomi was a bond of the covenant and a connection of magic.

In spite of that, she currently could not sense any presence of the Rune of the Bow from the Crimson Queen. Neither was there any presence of the Rune of the Twin Katana.

Was that really the Crimson Queen?

While enduring the intense agony in her chest, Asya prayed for Hal's safety.

Part 5

In fact, Hal had known since putting on Solomon's ring.

—Yeah, it's just as I suspected.

Everything had gone excessively smoothly, following the script written by the great sorcerer of antiquity. This ideal process had started from the discovery of the grimoire.

It looked like King Solomon sincerely sought a talented person to be his successor.

Everything was for the sake of entrusting the *ring* representing his authority and his rune to the talented person who would appear one day—then steal everything from him, body, mind, runes and all.

Was Solomon's true motive simply to "resurrect himself in the present world"?

"If possible, please surprise me with a different result... Owwww."

"Haruga-kun, are you alright!?"

A sudden headache attacked Hal, bringing him to his knees.

He did not have any spare strength to respond to Orihime who had rushed to his side. His head was hurting as though it was about to split open—no, become pulverized.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Clutching his head, Hal rolled around and screamed.

He was unable to maintain a sitting posture, much less stand. Sometimes sprawling, sometimes facing up, he kept rolling, enduring the intense pain in his head.

"A-A Ruruk Soun magic circle...?"

The "☉" symbol appearing on the asphalt where Hal was rolling—It was the seal representing the Rune of the Ring. At the same time, there were twenty-four runes of Ruruk Soun surrounding the symbol to form a circle.

The arrangement signified "as Solomon's successor, you are the sacrifice."

What a terrifying curse. Of course, the mastermind that had devised this trap was Solomon's Ring currently on Hal's right index finger.

In an attempt to slice off Hal's mind completely from his body, the ring was currently attacking his mind.

If Hal were to lose, his body and runes would be stolen by Solomon's ring—

"Thinking back... there were definitely many things that were off... Back when I discovered the runes of the Bow and the Twin Katana, they were dormant... Only the ring's rune had descended from the sky in an awakened state..."

Hal was getting slightly accustomed to the headache, which allowed him to spout comments despite his unwell condition.

Gazing at Hal's right hand, Orihime shouted.

"Hold on, I will remove the ring for you now!"

"N-Not yet... Although the ring is causing me a lot of grief, I'm sure it's still useful. At least during this battle against Hannibal, let me wear—"

Hal gently rejected the kind girl's suggestion.

His head continued to hurt intensely, preventing him from getting up. However, Hal was finally able to stop rolling and he laid himself out face up with arms and legs outspread.

He turned his face to look at the battle in the sky over the Hudson River.

It happened to be the moment when Akuro-Ou was unleashing a hail of bullets in full burst mode while Rushalka made her rapid descent.

Without the ring's benefits, the operation decided during his brief call with Asya just now would have failed.

Orihime looked at Hal worriedly and immediately sat down next to him.

She went out of her way to sit in seiza posture, kneeling uncomfortably on

hard asphalt, so that she could rest Hal's head on her lap. Tormented by unbearable pain, Hal's only consolation was Orihime's considerate actions.

While Hal was watching the battle in such a state, Rushalka finally fired the sun-shooting divine bow.

With that, the salamander army was wiped out at last. Even Hannibal disappeared. However, Rushalka then had to make an emergency retreat from the dragonslaying spear's attack. The red dragon king made a comeback from the water— "Huh..? Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Hal screamed. This time, not only his head was hurting but also his right palm too.

This pain felt as though the skin of his right palm was being ripped off. On closer examination, he saw particles of red light leaking out of his right palm before rising slowly in the air.

The leaking particles were quite numerous. The red light gathered together into a gigantic mass almost the same size as a dragon.

In the next instant, the scene before his eyes filled Hal with disbelief.

"The Crimson Queen!?"

The red light leaking from his palm had turned into the Crimson Queen, what one could call his avatar.

Without even giving Hal a single glance, the queen casually looked around the vicinity of Manhattan Bridge.

"It's not your turn to debut... Hurry and come back!"

Hal's headache weakened slightly. Lying on the ground, he forced out a shout.

However, the Crimson Queen did not respond. Only then did Hal notice that the rune visible on his red avatar's palm was not the Rune of the Bow but the Rune of the Ring!

"The queen has been stolen..."

"Ehhhhh!?"

Orihime exclaimed in surprise after hearing Hal's whisper.

It was probably while Hal was using techniques of assured annihilation in succession, which depleted his reserves of magical power, that he presented an opening to be taken advantage of.

The Crimson Queen's majestic form hovered in the air over Manhattan Bridge.

Despite being a size smaller than the dragon king Hannibal, the red dragon lacked neither power nor elegance. A weapon took form in her right hand.

Rather than the dragonslaying bow, it was a golden ring with a diameter of seven meters or so.

This was the manifestation of the Rune of the Ring as a magic wand. Currently, Solomon's ring held control over the queen.

"Hahahaha! Let us fight again after so long, queen!"

Hannibal roared with delight and flew towards Manhattan Bridge.

His intent was to pierce the Crimson Queen with the tip of the dragonslaying spear. Hal did not know if it was because Solomon's ring wanted to avoid a direct confrontation, but the queen flew up rapidly.

The red queen of dragons instantly rose in altitude with Hannibal in close pursuit.

With Hannibal as the opponent, how much of a fight could Solomon's ring put up? At this rate, Hal might end up losing his trump card, the queen, for nothing...

Hal wanted to get up but could not muster the strength.

Perhaps because Solomon's ring had focused its attention on the Crimson Queen, his headache was much better now. However, Hal still felt exhaustion in his entire body, preventing him from even lifting a single finger.

"Haruga-kun, I'll definitely pull out the ring this time!"

Seeing that the situation was dire, Orihime grabbed Hal's right hand forcefully.

But just as she was about to pull off the ring—She was taken aback in

surprise. As expected of a magic item, the ring refused to budge at all.

"No good after all... Well, I did suspect from the start whether this would happen..."

"A-Although I am very worried about that too, Haruga-kun, when on earth did your arm *turn into this!*?"

Hal simply went "huh?" and cocked his head when confronted by Orihime's urgent question.

Unable to comprehend, he then looked at his right arm.

Solomon's ring was still worn on his index finger. Luster entered his view—his entire arm looked as though it had been coated with a layer of glass. It happened to be nighttime and the surface of his arm was reflecting starlight.

Orihime gently stroked Hal from his right palm to his upper arm.

The texture felt very like metal, cold and hard, but the joints could still bend and move freely. Hal himself had checked many times previously.

"...What a pain. This usually doesn't happen unless I'm focusing too much. I never expected this to happen to my body while I'm contending with the ring."

Back when he first obtained the Crimson Queen, this change had been limited to his hand, from his fingers to his wrist.

After acquiring the Twin Katana recently, it had extended to his elbow. Right now, the hardening phenomenon had expanded to his right shoulder. This was presumably an effect of obtaining the Ring.

"Cold and hard like this, it resembles a dragon's body."

"....."

"Could this be what the man in black was talking about last time!? He said you might turn into a dragon one day, Haruga-kun...!"

"Maybe."

The mysterious Sophocles had said this in front of Hal and Orihime once.

'In the past, the type of non-dragon creatures known as "hybrid" dragons—In truth, they were unexpectedly commonplace. Of course, pure dragons were

very numerous too.'

But to think a human could transform into or become reborn as a dragon...

Hal did not want to look morbid, so he simply lay on the ground and shrugged. Meanwhile, Orihime seemed quite worked up.

Then her eyes glistened with tears and large teardrops fell.

"Idiot! Why didn't you confide in me!?"

"This kind of thing... would only cause the confidant to agonize and I'd be causing you trouble."

"Certainly not! We are friends and comrades and I—love you, Haruga-kun. Whatever it takes, I wish to be of help to you!"

"...Huh? W-What do you mean?"

"I... love you, Haruga-kun. Not the kind between friends, but the love for a man. I love you deeply."

Hal's reflexive question instantly elicited Orihime's confession. Furthermore, it was a confession where there was absolutely no room for misinterpretation.

Orihime gazed fervently at Hal. All the faint suspicions he had had so far were instantly verified this moment.

Hal was overcome with urgency. He had to hurry up and give Orihime a response.

Ever since a long time ago, I've felt for you—Just as Hal was about to start...

Orihime's lips suddenly drew near and kissed him lightly on the lips.

"Juujuuji!?"

"M-My apologies. I was thinking I might lose to Luna-san if I didn't offer anything more than a confession..." said Orihime shyly.

Hal felt his brain was about to boil.

His thoughts and feelings were extremely confused.

His entire body was feeling exceptional joy. This was also the happiest moment of Hal's life. The desire to cherish Orihime's feelings was almost going

to explode. However, he was currently in an urgent crisis. There was the pressing problem of Hannibal to be resolved. Now was not the time to be doing this sort of thing.



Staring at the flustered Hal, Orihime brought her lips close again.

This was the second kiss. Longer than the first one, their lips overlapped with a push from Orihime. It probably lasted over twenty seconds.

She even went as far as to extend her inexperienced tongue timidly.

Using her tongue, Orihime searched for Hal's and slowly entangled their tongues together.

Only after kissing for quite a while did they finally separate their lips and gaze upon each other passionately. They were so close together that their foreheads were almost touching and they could feel each other's breath clearly.

"J-Juujouji..."

"I don't want to lose... I don't want to lose to Luna-san or anyone else... This is my first time feeling this way. Haruga-kun, will you forgive me for what I did...?"

"S-Sure."

"Will you agree to tell me anything and everything from now on? I wish to become part of your strength, Haruga-kun. I wish to do many things for you, Haruga-kun."

"S-Sure."

"Am I allowed... to love you, Haruga-kun? Or is romance within the team forbidden?"

"O-Of course, you're allowed, Juujouji!"

"Thank you!"

Orihime pounced on Hal, who was lying on the ground, and hugged him tightly.

Hal's entire body could feel her wondrous curves and body warmth, making him very flustered. However, times like these required composure. He must recall the sage time he had implemented in the Izu shore last time.

Meanwhile, Orihime gasped and her face went bright red.

"S-S-S-S-Sorry. I got swept up in the moment because of the slight confusion from seeing your body's unusual change... and did that. B-But please know that

my feelings are absolutely not a lie, okay?"

"I-I-I-I-I know. Of course I know!"

"I honestly love you so much, Haruga-kun... I love you."

Crap. It was impossible to calm his mind. Orihime was too adorable.

However, he had other things to worry about at the moment. Indeed, he needed to rack his brain to find a solution to the great crisis of the Crimson Queen being hijacked.

—Ironically, the solution to this problem lay in Solomon's ring.

According to legend, possession of this ring allowed the user to bend angels and demons to their will and listen to the voices of animals and plants. This was how Hal had listened to the hearts of leviathans earlier.

This function still remained in effect. Even if he wanted to interrupt this function, Hal had no way of taking off the ring.

At that moment, Hal sensed it. Over on the side, watching her master and partner engaging in displays of affection, the nine-tailed fox-wolf wanted to convey a message.

"Akuro-Ou... Do you have a way to take the queen back?"

Orihime also sensed her partner's thoughts.

Earlier, the gigantic white beast had unleashed a barrage upon the Army of Fire. Her cool gaze was staring downwards at Hal and Orihime on the road surface when it suddenly shifted somewhere else—Akuro-Ou was looking at where Hal's magic gun had fallen.

Hal had accidentally tossed the gun away when rolling on the ground after putting on the ring. Orihime tilted her head and said, "Just use this handgun?"

Akuro-Ou transmitted the image of a "blade" from her mind.

The vanquishing of evil to uphold justice. This was a mystic technique of the glorious Twin Katana. Realizing the implied meaning, Hal said, "Juujouji, that's the move we used at the Dragon Palace Court last time...! It might be a bit inappropriate to call this a stroke of good luck, but with Hannibal helping out by

occupying Solomon right now, it should work!"

"I!"

Hugging Hal all this time, Orihime could not help but gasp in response. She immediately rose up to retrieve the magic gun and committed her resolve.

"Speaking of which, Haruga-kun, it feels like you are on the same level as Solomon. In a frontal showdown, there is definitely a chance of victory... Haruga-kun! Akuro-Ou and I will make an attempt, so please lend your power to us, Haruga-kun!"

Saying that, Orihime immediately helped Hal get up then embraced him tightly. Not only that, but Orihime's voluptuous bust was pressed against Hal's chest, a sensation that Hal had experienced a number of times now. In addition to being soft and elastic, it rivaled the size of small melons.

"J-Juujouji, even without injecting my magical power, Akuro-Ou should be able to do it in her current state..."

"Y-Yes, it might be possible, but I am not too confident in myself, which is why I'd like to follow what we did last time... No?" asked Orihime with a blush.

Just now, Asya and Rushalka had used the sun-shooting divine bow without Double Casting. However, this did not guarantee that Orihime could do the same.

Hal relented. At the same time, he felt unprecedentedly nervous.

He was so close to Orihime that their noses were about to touch and he could look clearly into her watery eyes and passionate countenance. This moment was stimulating his heart rate in a completely different manner from any previous moment.

"O-Of course you can. Yeah."

"Thank you. I will definitely... do my best. Th-Then please proceed, like last time, alright?"

This was also the first time Orihime urged Hal like this. How adorable.

Hal cried out "Juujouji!" without thinking and embraced her tightly, thus squeezing out magical power from his heart, sending it into Orihime's heart.

"Mm... Haruga-kun, I love you so much..."

Professing her love for him, the girl moaned in ecstasy, gently receiving the incoming torrent of magical power.

Orihime gently stroked Hal's back with her right hand.

Her left hand gripped the magic gun. Suddenly, the manifestation of the Rune of the Twin Katana appeared under the gun—A bayonet with a fifteen-centimeter blade.

Akuro-Ou's nine tails changed too. The rightmost tail manifested a large sword while the leftmost tail manifested a smaller sword.

The tips of the tails were curled like how human hands made fists. The fox-wolf leviathan was wielding the pair of large and small blades with dexterity.

Raising the two swords overhead, Akuro-Ou formed a cross with the blades.

Thus, preparations were complete. Orihime continued to support Hal's body with her right arm while raising the magic gun in her left, pointing it at Solomon's ring.

She was aiming at Hal's dangling right hand, the golden ring worn on his index finger—

Nineteen runes of Ruruk Soun appeared over Akuro-Ou's head, signifying "I summon the twin blades of exorcism, to deliver seraphic punishment to nefarious evil dragons."

Severing a dragonslaying rune's magical power, neutralizing it.

Such was the effect of the Holy Cross of the Twin Katana, a technique of assured annihilation. Not only did it erase magical power but it was also an exorcism technique that inflicted damage to the owner of that magical power.

The two swords raised over Akuro-Ou's head were beginning to give off a golden glow.

However, the light blinked, disappearing and reappearing.

The process was not going smoothly. Simply possessing a great quantity of magical power was not enough to use this technique. Last time, Luna Francois

had said that "Holy and evil, right and wrong, yin and yang, demonic and divine... Entrust opposing elements to the twin blades so as to produce an attack embodying the rivalry of complementary opposites. Since this magic requires such complexity in execution..."

The atrocious act of wielding a sacred and blessed divine blade for slaughter.

This paradoxical ultimate technique required the coexistence of mutually incompatible elements. To be honest, this would be a challenge for either Luna or Asya to perform on their own.

Despite obtaining magical power from Hal, it was too difficult for Orihime after all.

Even so, she still tried to do her best.

"Wait, Haruga-kun. I will definitely save you...!"

Holding the magic gun in her left, supporting Hal with her right, Orihime cried out loudly. She was committing her entire body, mind and soul, desperately trying to control the magical power.

The twin swords over their heads kept blinking.

However, the golden radiance gradually weakened. Orihime's attempt was going to end in failure, her desperate efforts rendered futile. But just before that happened— "Y-You are very close, Orihime-san. Let me help out too..."

"Asya-san!?"

The next thing they knew, Asya had arrived by their side.

Hal's childhood friend looked haggard with Hazumi supporting her shoulder. However, she still strained her injured body to reach out, placing her hand on the magic gun held in the junior witch's hand.

Orihime and Asya. Holding the magic gun together, the two of them controlled the technique of assured annihilation in unison.

At last, the twin swords in cross formation released a dazzling golden glow. This blinding light, like the sun's, shone upon Hal and his companions.

Using the tip of the bayonet's blade, Orihime and Asya stabbed Solomon's

ring.

Separated from from Hal's finger, the ring fell and rolled on the asphalt road.

This was the moment of success for the exorcism technique executed by the twin blades and the two witches.

Part 6

"That took a lot of work but it's finally settled down at last..."

Hal muttered and picked up Solomon's ring.

The headache and exhaustion had passed and he was finally able to move at will. This was thanks to the Rune of the Twin Katana dispelling the ring's power.

Hal stared at the ring for a while—Then placed it on his right index finger again.

"Haruga-kun!?" "Haruomi!" "Senpai!?"

The three witches watching from the side—Orihime, Asya and Hazumi—all jumped in fright at the same time.

One could hardly blame them. After all, this ring was the culprit of the commotion just now. However, there was no denying that it was extremely useful as a tool. Sure enough, one would not want to waste it.

...Intending to deprive Hal of his mind and runes, the ring released magical power again.

The headache returned. However, since it was the second time, Hal was almost accustomed to the pain. Compared to the first time, it was easy to endure. More importantly— Hal focused his mind on the palm of his right hand, instantly causing a cross-shaped seal to surface.

Empowered to banish evil and uphold justice, simply stated, it was the Rune of the Twin Katana with divine powers of exorcism. Shining with splendor in Hal's hand, it suppressed Solomon's curse.

"Juujouji was right. I'm similar in level to my predecessor, so I shouldn't lose that easily. Now, I've gotten a good feel for his ability."

"Even so, that was way too reckless..." Asya murmured with an expression of exasperation.

Hal shrugged and said, "I would never act recklessly without benefits. But this time, the outcome counts as okay."

Despite having put on Solomon's ring, he could not sense the hearts of "serpents" this time.

After all, he still had not mastered the ring's usage. It would be asking for too much at the current stage. Nevertheless, there were already parts that he could control according to his wishes...

Hal closed his eyes and imagined the Crimson Queen.

The image gradually appeared under his eyelids. It was the viewpoint from the queen's current perspective.

—The sky over Central Park in Manhattan.

—The intense aerial battle in progress against Red Hannibal.

—The golden ring serving as the queen's weapon, used like a frisbee to execute thrown attacks. Hannibal swung his dragonslaying spear in response to brush it away. The ring returned to the queen's hand again.

—Soon after, the Crimson Queen raised the golden ring to the sky.

—The ring began to emit an extremely unpleasant and dissonant noise, "nyyyaaaarrrllaaaaaathooooooooottt.....@@x●□◎△÷=∗¥！"

—Affected by this bizarre noise, Hannibal lost substantial speed.

—This was a technique of assured annihilation intrinsic to the Rune of the Ring. Nine runes of Ruruk Soun appeared in front of the ring held by the queen, signifying "I play the sound of the star of aggravation to disorient sentient minds."

—The red dragon king roared with excitement and delight, "Petty tricks!" The enemy's ferocity and annoying obstacles only served to heighten his amusement.

"Although your fight is all heated up, it's time for me to take back the queen..."

Closing his eyes, Hal muttered.

Immediately, a new development unfolded in the battle shown under his eyelids.

—The golden ring used as a weapon by the Crimson Queen suddenly vanished.

—Replacing it was a crimson bow that appeared in the queen's left hand along with an arrow of light in her right. She drew the bowstring and shot. At the same time as the shot, a new arrow appeared. The Crimson Queen kept firing in succession.

—The arrival of the bow and arrows caused Hannibal to go "Oh?" and narrow his eyes, deploying imperishable protection. The countless incoming arrows were all blocked by the pearly barrier.

"Judging from the situation, things should be fine for now..." Hal said softly and opened his eyes. He had wrested control of the queen back again just now.

"I plan on heading over to participate in the final showdown. Asya and Juujouji, why don't you take a break here?"

The intense battle so far had depleted Asya's pseudo-divinity and injured her heart.

Likewise, Orihime was unable to use pseudo-divinity anymore. Added to that was the fact that she had been quite reckless to perform a technique of assured annihilation requiring elite skills to control, thus utterly exhausting her mind and body. She was in no state for further fighting.

After hearing Hal's request, the childhood friend sighed.

"I got it... I'll listen to you this once to avoid getting in your way. However, I have a completely unrelated question."

"What is it?"

"Why were you and Orihime-san hugging together just now, Haruomi...?"

"!?"

Hal was rendered speechless by Asya's piercing question.

Speaking of which, his embrace with Orihime just now had apparently been

witnessed. After unleashing the sun-shooting divine bow, Asya and Hazumi had asked the helicopter pilot to land on Manhattan Bridge, taking them to meet up with Hal directly. Thanks to them taking such action, the final scene of "Asya coming to the rescue!" was made possible.

Fortunately, the kissing scene was not witnessed—Hal panicked greatly inside.

Ahem. Orihime coughed lightly and said with a cheerful expression, "Asya-san, just now, Haruga-kun was transmitting magical power to help compensate for my inadequacies, which was why we had to press our bodies tightly together."

"R-Really?"

"Perhaps it looked like a bizarre act, but that would be a misunderstanding. We were simply carrying out an essential step for the sake of accomplishing the mission. I hope you won't misinterpret in a certain way, please."

Asya could only answer "I see" and nod after Orihime replied fluently.

Despite her doubts, she had no evidence to pursue the matter—That was the feeling. On the other hand, Hazumi was as pure as an angel and nodded honestly.

"Wow... Even that sort of thing is possible, Senpai!?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Hal refrained from speaking as much as possible and nodded.

He secretly made eye contact with Orihime. Having pulled through a crisis, the Japanese girl nodded to him with an accomplice's eyes. Without speaking, her expression and gaze seemed to read "it would be problematic if a romance within the team were to come to light, so we must maintain confidentiality..."

Finding Orihime's response reliable and feeling slightly guilty at the same time, Hal changed the subject.

"So that's that. It's time for me to—"

"Leave it to me, Senpai. Please, Minadzuki, lend your power to us!"

As soon as she finished speaking, Hazumi sang a song of summoning.

The emerald serpentine dragon leviathan—Minadzuki—materialized overhead.

This was their third attack wave they had kept in reserve until now. Although a bit uncertain on the aspect of combat strength, this was the final vassal whom Hal was able to entrust the power of dragonbane.

"Because I am your assistant, Senpai... Please allow me to follow you to the very end!"

Hazumi suppressed her unease at the impending battle against a dragon king and declared firmly.

Hinokagutsuchi's appearance as a dragon king in the past—The Crimson Queen.

By obtaining her heartmetal, Hal had taken a step further and claimed the queen's physical body. But so far, all he had been able to do was use it in a time-limited manner.

The bottleneck was the output of Hal's heart, *i.e.* heartmetal.

Hal's heart was unable to generate the massive magical power necessary for driving and sustaining a dragon king-class body. Reaching that level would probably be essential for conquering the Road to Kingship as Sophocles had said.

Expanding one's territory across the Earth and the universe, erecting numerous Monoliths that were akin to devices for generating magical power, extracting magical power from the ground like taxation— If he were to follow this sequence, he would probably ascend to the dragon king throne like Princess Yukikaze or Hannibal.

But currently, the Crimson Queen under Hal's control still carried magical power rivaling Hannibal's despite her inability to match the strongest dragon king in direct combat.

All this was thanks to Solomon's ring and the Rune of the Ring.

Not too long ago, this instrument of magic control had absorbed the magical

power of seventy-two serpent souls.

Together with the ring's own magical power and that produced by Hal's heart—Combining all these sources together, Hal just managed to cobble together enough power to match a dragon king-class enemy.

Hence, the Crimson Queen's physical body did not crumble like in previous battles.

"Although I'm still not sure how much this ring can do..."

While muttering, Hal silently spoke to his avatar.

Please. Continue to draw Hannibal's attention like this.

The Crimson Queen was currently looking down at Old Manhattan's skyscrapers from an altitude of seven hundred meters while engaging Red Hannibal in an aerial battle.

The two dragons were flying at almost the same height with roughly a kilometer separating them.

As one would expect, the one to attack first was the queen, equipped with long-range weaponry. Using the crimson bow, she fired consecutively, sending out arrows of light nonstop to produce a hail of projectiles. Even without using a technique of assured annihilation, this wave of attacks already matched the firepower of Akuro-Ou's full burst earlier.

Furthermore, this was a concentrated attack with Hannibal as the sole target.

In terms of damage potential alone, the queen's consecutive shots were probably more powerful.

"S-So amazing, Senpai!"

"I can't believe there's such a big gap between a dragon king and our leviathans huh..."

Hal observed the queen's archery skills while conversing quietly with Hazumi.

The two of them were currently at the Rockefeller Center in the heart of Old Manhattan, on the roof observation deck of the GE Building. The top floor of this seventy-story building used to be called the "Top of the Rock" due to its

excellent and expansive view of New York's night scenery.

The two of them had been transported here by riding on Minadzuki's palm.

Although they were two kilometers away from the aerial battle, due to using Vision Amplification magic, they were able to clearly see the two dragons fighting intensely.

...The Crimson Queen kept using her prided archery to fire in rapid succession.

Conversely, Hannibal used a technique of assured annihilation. The runic arrangement of "O spear of mine, gather the northern star's power to advance with ferocity" appeared in front of him, blocking all of the incoming arrows.

Wielding the spear, the dragon king advanced forward slowly in this manner.

However, the queen also took countermeasures—the trajectory of the arrows curved.

All the arrows fired head on were blocked. However, the Crimson Queen proceeded to fire arrows along a curved trajectory to skillfully evade the runes of Ruruk Soun blocking in front. Arrows pierced into Hannibal's gigantic body one after another.

Like boomerangs, the numerous arrows turned back from behind despite missing the target.

These arrows attacked Hannibal's back, head and lower body.

The red dragon king defended using imperishable protection and yelled, "O shining spear of the northern star, offer to me a thousand spears!"

Then he released his weapon—the dragonslaying spear. The spear's shaft was pitch-black and was comparable in length to the dragon king's body that exceeded twenty meters.

Suddenly, a thousand spears completely identical to this weapon appeared in the surroundings.

In addition to being held in the hand for thrusting, spears could also be thrown as projectile weapons. Naturally, precise sniping like a bow and arrow was impossible, but if one were to deploy an infantry battalion to launch spears at the enemy all at once, there would be no need for aiming.

Hannibal's technique of assured annihilation replicated this type of attack.

Out of the one thousand spears in total, dozens flew at the Crimson Queen first. Naturally, the Crimson Queen deployed imperishable protection to defend but something unexpected happened.

Normally speaking, imperishable protection would be able to block enemy attacks and deflect them.

One would expect a similar result this time, but among the dozens of spears, a few pierced the protection guarding the queen!

"What!?"

Just as Hal was taken aback by surprise, another few dozen spears flew over.

Although the majority of this wave of spears were deflected, a few stabbed into the protection again. Then dozens of spears flew in again, leaving a few stuck in the barrier—This outcome repeated ten-odd times.

Over fifty spears were stabbed into the pearly shield defending the Crimson Queen.

Then Hal realized something. The queen's movements had turned rather sluggish, making the earlier nimble flying ability seem like a lie. Even when he silently commanded "fly" in his mind, the queen did not move.

There were dozens of dragonslaying spears stabbed into the imperishable protection.

Their combined weight was hindering the queen's flight.

"Come to think of it, the ancient Romans used a similar tactic..."

Killing was not the only purpose in the tactic of throwing spears.

Confronted with thrown spears, with sufficient luck, one could block using a shield. However, embedding a heavy spear into a shield would make it difficult to carry, rendering it unusable. Hence, the throwing of spears was also a method of weakening the enemy's combat strength.

"I remember the Chinese were the ones who listed the spear as the king of weapons... Uh—Gahhhhhh!"

"Senpai!?"

The damage inflicted upon imperishable protection resulted in a backlash against Hal's heart.

Stabbed by dozens of spears, there was quite a large burden of course. Seeing Hal groan in pain, Hazumi rushed to his side.

Ignoring Hal and Hazumi, the airborne Hannibal prepared to deliver a critical blow.

With a line of spears ready around him, he summoned a new dragonslaying spear to his hand.

"Well then... Tyrannos of the Bow, although I have enjoyed myself beyond expectation, it is time to liberate you."

The spear Hannibal had summoned this time was almost twice his height.

The red dragon king lifted this extra large spear to point forward horizontally, sending it flying straight at the immobilized queen. In addition, the runes of "O spear of mine, gather the northern star's power to advance with ferocity" were deployed in front to provide maximum thrust!

"I-I guess I have to risk everything on one gamble... Shirasaka, please summon Minadzuki!"

"Yes, Senpai. I am ready any time!"

"Huh?"

When Hal made his request while enduring his pain, Hazumi inexplicably came to his left side.

The adorable junior student was leaning her delicate body intimately against Haruga Haruomi—leaning herself against the male transfer student who was her senior.

"Sh-Shirasaka, what are you doing!?"

"? Because it was like this between you and Nee-sama just now... This will allow me to receive magical power from within you, right?"

"!?"

At the same time, the crystal ball held in Minadzuki's right hand released extremely powerful white lightning.

The size of these lightning bolts rivaled Minadzuki herself, who had a body length of ten-odd meters. Furthermore, a total of eight lightning bolts were shot out at once.

The powerful lightning tore through the darkness of the night, soaring though the sky.

After blowing away Hannibal's barrier—the thousand spears—

The impact from the eight bolts of lightning finally halted Hannibal's advance. The paralysis caused by electrocution was apparently preventing him from moving his body freely.

"Nuu! Stop struggling in vain, Tyrannos!"

Once the lightning strikes were over, Hannibal sluggishly turned his body's direction.

He glared diagonally at Minadzuki below and slowly swung his right arm. It looked like he was planning to throw his dragonslaying spear at her emerald serpentine body.

The sluggishness was probably an aftereffect of the electrical attack. This was the crucial moment if one were going to decide the match.

"Queen, use the Rune of the Twin Katana!"



Responding to Hal's shout, the crimson bow and the arrow of light disappeared from the queen's arms.

Manifesting to take their place was a pair of divine swords, one large and one small. The Crimson Queen brandished the twin swords magnificently and cut down all the dozens of spears embedded on her imperishable protection like shackles.

Having regained her freedom, the queen charged at Hannibal.

Targeting the strongest dragon king who was restrained by Minadzuki's lightning strikes, if one of the two swords could take this opportunity to stab into the dragon's vital heartmetal— However, Hannibal turned to intercept the queen boldly.

"Hahahahaha! I actually like you very much for struggling on the brink of death. Easy victories are too boring!"

The dragon king roared with laughter at this critical juncture while spewing blazing flames from his mouth.

A scorching blue-white conflagration. Even though it was neither magic nor a technique of assured annihilation, it was supernatural fire that had incinerated numerous human cities. Furthermore, these were explosive flames coming from within dragon king Hannibal's body.

Wielding the twin swords with the intent to execute slashing attacks, the Crimson Queen was engulfed by the flames completely.

For a minute or two, incinerated by blue-white flames—

"Wahhhhhhhh!"

"Senpai!? Please, Minadzuki, hurry and rescue Senpai and the queen!"

Due to the heat, Hal screamed as though his heart was being burned. Hazumi panicked and pleaded sorrowfully with her partner. However, it was too late.

Scorched by Hannibal's conflagration, the Crimson Queen finally crashed down.

The crimson body was scorched black all over. In human terms, it would be severe burns all over the body. No more strength remaining to continue the fight, Hal could sense that. All he could manage now was to de-materialize the queen before suffering a fatal blow.

The owner of the flames that had cremated the queen laughed proudly and casually spread his wings.

Next—In that very moment...

Supposed to have no remaining strength, the queen moved her left arm swiftly, throwing one of her twin swords.

It was the kodachi out of the pair. The sword shot out like an arrow, stabbing its blade into Hannibal's chest, right on top of the heartmetal—analogous to the location of the human heart.

"Wh...at?"

Hannibal looked in shock at the kodachi buried in his chest.

He never expected the queen to have the strength to strike back on the verge of death—He seemed surprised from the bottom of his heart. As a seasoned veteran of a dragon king, he should not be this careless. In truth, even Hal, the one controlling the queen, had thought that it was over.

"Was it Minadzuki...?"

Surprised, Hal muttered.

He suddenly noticed that seven runes of Ruruk Soun had manifested behind the winged serpentine dragon leviathan. They signified "healing hand."

Hal remembered it was during the battle against Princess Yukikaze when Genbu-Ou had used this healing magic—

In front of the surprised Hal and Hazumi, Hannibal began to crash down after the Crimson Queen.

As one would expect, the heartmetal was a dragon's most important organ and greatest vulnerability. It looked like even a dragon king could not overturn this fact—

Epilogue

Hal and Hazumi had been watching the battle's conclusion from the observation deck on a building's roof.

To get back down to ground level, they borrowed Minadzuki's power again. Riding on the left forelimb's palm, they had Minadzuki transport them from the three-hundred-meter tall roof to the ground.

The place they landed was a major district known as Broadway in the past.

Furthermore, this was the crossroads at Times Square, surrounded by towering high-rise buildings, massive screens and gigantic advertisements. In the past, this was the central business district where a large number of New Yorkers and tourists gathered—A well-known attraction until the end of the twentieth century.

Getting off from her partner's palm, Hazumi seemed a little unsteady on her feet.

"Are you okay, Shirasaka? Sorry, just hang in there a little longer."

"Y-Yes. Sorry for causing trouble for you..."

"Of course not. We would've lost long ago if you and Minadzuki hadn't been there just now. It's my fault for pushing you into extra time when you've already won the Best Effort Award."

"Not at all... I couldn't be more glad to be of help to you, Senpai..."

Supported by Hal's arm, Hazumi walked unsteadily.

Her expression looked a bit out of it. Perhaps there was some aftershock remaining from the transfer of magical power to Minadzuki via her heart. However, the healing runes witnessed earlier had disappeared from behind Minadzuki.

Did that really happen?

Hal still could not believe for certain. However, without such a cheat, it would not have been possible to corner Hannibal to that extent.

The red dragon king had returned to human form. He was sitting on the ground, cross-legged, on a road at Times Square where Hal and Hazumi had landed, currently resting his injured body.

"You came chasing for the kill huh? A weakened enemy would only get cornered like a drowning dog, to be decapitated... Hmm, this is commonplace on the battlefield."

Surprisingly, Hannibal was laughing with delight and summoned the dragonslaying spear to his right hand.

Still in a sitting posture on the ground, he pointed the spear at Hal. The proud grin on his face showed eagerness to fight.

Even though he could not transform into a dragon due to the damage to his heartmetal, even though he was not even able to stand up, none of that mattered to the battle-hardened dragon king.

Part of his body could still move and he had magical power remaining—

In that case, he was going to fight on and intercept the enemy's follow-up attack. Furthermore, he was going to show his sincere smile without reserve.

"Rather than a warrior race, dragons seem more like creatures on a different dimension from us in terms of pure valor. Seriously..."

Holding the magic gun in his right hand, Hal actually felt impressed.

The Crimson Queen had already vanished, unable to sustain her physical form due to the inflicted damage.

However, Hal still had his magic gun and Minadzuki was in fine health.

Overall, the advantage should be on their side—But in a showdown between a cornered rat and a cornered dragon, Hal had a faint feeling that it was quite risky. There was an annoying sense of foreboding.

How unbelievable. To think that Hal would experience something that sounded like what Asya would say.

Wasn't this precisely what would be called instincts of the wild? However, Hal felt strongly inside that he should follow this instinct, so he said, "So, can we talk for now about a ceasefire?"

"Oh? A ceasefire?"

"Yeah. To be honest, I don't think there's any benefit to either side if we drag our beaten up bodies into an extermination match. Red Hannibal, that dragon king over in Europe used to be your mortal rival, right?"

"Hmm."

To Hannibal, the Black Lightning Emperor was a potential enemy faction carrying more weight than Hal. Just as Hal mentioned that as a deterrent, Hazumi tugged his sleeve.

"Senpai, hurry and look at that!"

The obedient junior was uncharacteristically lapsing in manners and her tone of voice was quite urgent.

Immediately, Hal looked where she indicated—Up in the sky. Hal could not help but gasp. A huge number of flying creatures had appeared in the air above Times Square without him noticing.

Blue-white ghostlights with dragonoid shapes... Seventy-two serpent souls.

In addition, they were flying all over the place, circling around the *golden ring* that was hovering in midair.

The ring's diameter was roughly seven meters. Until earlier, it had been wielded in the Crimson Queen's hand.

It was the weapon form of the Rune of the Ring. Most likely, it had separated from within the queen just before she vanished, thus staying in the present world!

Surprised, Hal looked at his index finger.

Solomon's ring on his finger was vibrating slightly.

The golden ring in the air also started to vibrate as though it was resonating with the true ring itself.

Next, the serpent souls flying in the air began to sing a song.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

They sounded like the songs of mermaids, calling to passengers on ships, bewitching them and dragging them into the ocean. Beautiful with a hint of melancholy.

Hal recalled what Orihime had said to him just now.

King Solomon and Haruga Haruomi were on similar levels. In a direct confrontation, no one could predict the outcome of a fight—

Seizing the chance when Hal and Hannibal were both exhausted from the intense showdown, Solomon's ring had launched its counterattack.

Afterword

"A●●a actually has a mother who's like an upgraded version of her and I'm planning to have her debut in this upcoming Volume 5."

"In that case, it's probably game over for A●●a, I guess?"

—Two novelists talking shop on a certain day in 2014

Hello everyone, it's been a while.

This series has reached its 5th volume and the stage finally expands beyond the borders of Japan.

In addition, new characters have debuted one after another. Although compared to the regulars, most of them are conceived as special guest appearances, if a certain mother became a supporting character candidate, her daughter's position would presumably become more and more precarious—"Stop saying such inauspicious things as the author!"

Oh my, A●●a-san. You arrived quite early this time.

"That's because the pages allotted to the afterword for this volume are so few. Forget about that. There's absolutely no need to write a mother character, is there!?"

That's because, you know, everyone loves pretty older ladies.

Beautiful witches of indeterminate age and beautiful maidens with disguised appearances are standard-issue weapons in the light novel industry. Isn't that lovely? Stuff like high school teachers who look like middle schoolers despite being in their forties. By the way, I actually know people like that in the real world, but the fine lines at the corners of their eyes will still secretly betray their age...

"You are making dangerous statements that'll get you red-carded, but let's get back to the main topic. I have no objection to middle-aged women

characters that stimulate pedophilia, but you don't have to plunk that kind of label on my mother, right?"

However, the fact that you have this kind of mother was already decided back in Volume 1.

"Quit pretending you're very detail-oriented only during times like these. How dare you say that when your memory of the setting is clearly fuzzy and you keep flipping back to check earlier volumes in the process of your writing... Not only that, but you even made casual reference to the amnesia cliché in another author's work. Rein in your unruly behavior please!"

Oh, about that part, I did confirm properly with the one in question himself, so there's no problem. Yeah.

"The one in question himself... Are you referring to *Madan's Tōgre-san*?"

No, I mean Kawaguchi-sensei who's the creator. It was during a chat with him the other day.

"...In other words, about that super tactless dialogue near the beginning, could the other party be..."

It was simply a product of delusion. Fiction.

Whether myself or Kawaguchi-sensei, we're both highly-regarded gentlemen in the industry. We absolutely won't recklessly use female characters as the butt of that kind of joke!

"Look me properly in the eye when you go spouting this type of stupid excuse!"

Now then, this series is gradually approaching a climax.

"Th-That's such a crude way of changing the subject!"

Whether in terms of plot or the cover illustration, next volume will be the time for a certain female character to shine.

I know many readers had been waiting for this volume thinking that "logically speaking, Volume 5 should be Angel-chan's turn in the limelight" so in response to your hopes, I will do everything I can. Please wait patiently— "...Don't you find that you're putting in extra effort to advertise the upcoming volume this

time?"

Actually, that certain character is one that I've spent the most effort on, out of all the characters I've ever written.

"Huh?"

In the past, I wrote "a good girl whose personality was like an angel's" but the next thing I knew, I already made her dark side awaken because it'd be more interesting.

"Oh, you're talking about that shrine maiden from a certain series released by a certain publisher, right? Rather than a good girl, it'd be more apt to describe that little sister as having a 'good personality' and being wise in the ways of the world..."

Actually, that would have its own merits, I don't think there's anything wrong with that.

It's just that I still can't change the fact that I failed the challenge of "constructing a benevolent character completely purged of all negativity and evil." So this time, to avoid repeating the same mistakes, I deliberately made a big deal out of her angelic traits before her debut, so as to give myself no way out.

"S-So there's this kind of inside story behind that kind of telegraphed debut!?"

Because of these reasons, I hope to make the next volume a grand culmination of the angel challenge.

Dear readers, if it is okay with you, please confirm in Volume 6 for yourselves.

"Huh? Speaking of which, what about my round of romantic comedy invincibility after my awakening?"